

PREACHING MIRACLE STORIES OF THE GOSPELS  
IN CHINESE-INDONESIAN CONTEXT

A THESIS

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To

Fonny (my wife)

and

Agaretha (our only daughter),

who through them, God presents miracles in my life.

## CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK	9
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	50
4. PROJECT DESIGN	98
5. OUTCOMES	222
Appendix	
1. INTERVIEW WITH LOCAL PASTORS	228
2. QUESTIONNAIRE	247
BIBLIOGRAPHY	249
VITA	256

## ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figures

1. The big idea and sermon purpose	152
2. The formula of christological sermon purpose	155
3. The deductive pattern	157
4. The inductive pattern	159
5. The circles of illustration	170
6. Simple communication process	182
7. Movement on the stage	188

### Tables

1. Characteristics of the four Gospels	125
2. The categories of illustration	167

## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project addresses how to prepare and preach the miracle stories of the Gospels. The end product of this project is a manual that can be used by Seminary students, by pastors wishing to enhance their preaching proficiency, and by teachers of homiletics who want to teach the skills needed to prepare relevant miracle stories sermon, especially in Chinese-Indonesian context. The second section of this thesis-project addresses the theological framework of miracle stories of the Gospels. The third section addresses the literature reviews. The fourth section of the thesis-project is the manual itself, which addresses the practical concerns of how to prepare and deliver miracle stories of the Gospels sermon.

The manual found in section four is based on the principles of expository preaching developed by Haddon W. Robinson in his book, *Biblical Preaching*. His work is combined with other works in biblical and homiletical studies. Although slightly different in the steps of making the sermon, *Biblical Preaching* is the soul of this manual. This manual is the result of these combination and integration.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A type of Gospel narrative that deserves special attention is the miracle story. Jesus' miracles are prominent in the Gospels. Hillyer Hawthorne Straton stresses that "miracles stories occupy such a large place in the gospel narratives that to omit them in preaching is to leave out an essential part of the gospel message and to overlook a rich source of sermon material".<sup>1</sup> Due to their importance, every preacher should have serious concerns about them. Miracle stories should be exegeted and understood in the right ways to get their proper meaning.

The struggle to understand the real meaning of the miracle stories has taken place in many places, including in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> When reading miracle stories, many Christians think, "What is the meaning of the story for me? Will the Lord do the same for me?" Christians, including pastors, writers, and composers have been trying to connect miracle stories to their contemporary lives. They seek to find the theology of the miracles in their respective fields.

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<sup>1</sup> Hillyer Hawthorne Straton, *Preaching the Miracles of Jesus* (New York: Abingdon-Cokebury, 1950), 7.

<sup>2</sup> It's good to put attention to Bedjo's comment in his article *Miracle in Science Age: An Theological & Philosophical Perspective* (Seminar held in Petra Christian University in Surabaya: March 26, 2009), 1:

The recent case of Ponari, a boy healer from Jombang, has opened our eyes to the fact that in Indonesia, many people still believe in "miracles" or supernatural things such as believing that a stone could bring healing. Among the Indonesian Christians, instead of being skeptical, miracles have become themes consistently brought up in songs that, according to the writer, are theologically erroneous. On the other hand, the development of scientific knowledge has also driven some groups (both Christians and non-Christians) to reject anything that cannot be scientifically explained. . . . In the Christian community, the word "miracle" has been frequently understood in ways that are unbiblical and illogical.

However, many Christians do not give serious attention to properly understanding the meaning of miracle stories. In Indonesia, improper meaning of miracles has developed in this decade. Jonathan Prawira has these lyrics in the song he created, *The Miracle is Real*: "When I trust, the miracle becomes real; It is not caused by my power, but by Your power, o Lord. When I pray, the miracle becomes real."<sup>3</sup> Also in the song created by Isaac Arief, *He Understands*, "... for believers, the miracle is real ... However, He asks for one thing: that we believe until the miracle becomes real."<sup>4</sup> In the website of Abbalove ministries on miracles, it is written:

The word 'miracle' should be a word that we understand very well in our lives as believers. Why? Because the God we worship is a miracle-working God. In the midst of global crises, we long for miraculous things that God could do in our personal lives, work, ministries, etc.

In the example of Elijah who was taken cared of during a critical time (1 Kings 17: 1-24), we can learn three important things ...<sup>5</sup>

We may find these concepts and understanding in the realm of biblical text interpretation. For example, Mark 16:17-18<sup>6</sup> was interpreted like this:

Jesus gave the power to us, believers who believe in him to do the same miracles, even more than Jesus did. ... What is a miracle? 1. A miracle is our right as believers. 2. A miracle is the evidence of the gracious love of God. ... As

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<sup>3</sup> Lagu Penyembahan blog, [http://lagupenyembahan.blogspot.com/2009/11/mujizat-itu-nyata-jonathan-prawira\\_13.html](http://lagupenyembahan.blogspot.com/2009/11/mujizat-itu-nyata-jonathan-prawira_13.html) (Accessed May 7, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Indonesia Top Hits Song blog, <http://indo-tophits.blogspot.com/2008/12/dia-mengerti.html> (Accessed May 7, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Abbalove Ministries. Mukjizat di Tengah Masa Krisis. [http://www.abbalove.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=546&Itemid=23](http://www.abbalove.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=546&Itemid=23) (Accessed May 19, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> There may be some textual questions in this text: First, does it mean literally that we will not be hurt if we pick up snakes with our hands or when we drink deadly poison, and the sick people whom we place our hands on will get well? Second, does it apply to all situations or to some specific situation?

believers, the power has been given to us by the Lord Jesus; so that we are able to experience the marvelous miracles of our Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Reading the above texts carefully, we may summarize the theology of miracle in several points: first, God is the subject of miracles and man is the object of miracles. God is the miracle worker and we are the miracle getter. Second, the purpose of the miracle is to help us through our problems. Third, the realization of miracles is not dependent on God alone, but on us. God is able to make a miracle but we also have to pray and believe that He wants to do the miracle for us. In other words, by praying and believing, we create the condition for God to do the miracles. What Jesus did in the past, can be done today as well.

People like these messages. They help people face their problems and meet their difficulties. It becomes a tonic for the listeners who struggle in their daily lives. They like sermons that have these messages because they talk about them and their lives. These messages are on their side. For them, these messages are right because they are in the Bible. These kinds of sermons are right because it preaches the content of the bible.

Preaching does not just deal with preaching from the Bible, but also deals with how to preach the Bible accurately. The ultimate goal of preaching will be accomplished when preachers proclaim the scripture in their sermons. Bryan Chapell says, "Preaching accomplishes its spiritual purpose not because of the skills or the wisdom of a preacher

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<sup>7</sup> Youth DNA Puri blog, Bagaimana Menerima Mujizat? <http://youth-dna.blogspot.com/2009/09/bagaimana-menerima-mujizat.html> (Accessed May 19, 2010).

but because of the power of the Scripture proclaimed.”<sup>8</sup> Preachers have authority in the Scripture they preach and they have to stand “in submission to the text of Scripture. The issue of authority is inescapable. Either the preacher or the text will be the operant authority.”<sup>9</sup> The preacher of God always struggles with this question in his preparation time: “Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thoughts to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thoughts?”<sup>10</sup> In order to preach biblically, he lets the texts, not his thoughts, to govern the sermon. Preaching must be shaped by the message of Scripture. Of course, it’s not easy to discern the original meaning of the text. Every book and part of the Scripture was written in various genres and forms. Preachers should work hard to understand it. They have to pay attention to the characteristics and uniqueness of the text they will be preaching. They come to the text with the commitment to bend their thoughts to the text and preach what the biblical writers would like to say through the texts.

Preachers also have to show their total commitment as they preach the miracle texts. Like preaching other genres or forms of the Bible, they also have to get what the biblical writers want to tell their audience. This is not an easy work. When preaching the miracle texts, preachers should ask: can the slogan “Be Like Jesus” be applied to the passage? We may preach that Jesus forgives people who hate him and apply to our

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<sup>8</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 26.

<sup>9</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “A Theology of Preaching,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 22.

congregation that we have to be like Jesus who forgives His enemies. However, could we treat the miracle stories like that? Would we preach, Jesus heals Bartimeus and says in our application that we have to heal blind men too? Or is it right to say we have to show our compassion to blind men? Does the gospel author intend to say this to his audience? Stanley Olson says, "Both the preacher and the audience come to a miracle text with preconceptions which affect proclamation. . . . For example, it is noted that the God who fed the five thousand also provides food for the billions, or that the healing of the blind is of the same order as the body's own capacity to heal itself."<sup>11</sup>

It is true that a good sermon should connect with the people. Harry Emerson Fosdick states that good sermons "try to face people's real problems with them, meet their difficulties, answer their questions, confirm their most noble faiths, and interpret their experiences in sympathetic, wise, understanding cooperation."<sup>12</sup> The preacher should be aware that he talks to human beings when he preaches.

On the other hand, there is a hidden danger in focusing more on the listeners. The preacher will be the favorite speaker but he loses the essence of preaching. The preacher is not preaching when he preaches in this way. Haddon Robinson says,

Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach Scripture, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley N. Olson, "Interpreting the Miracles of Healing for Preaching" *Word & World* 2/4 (1982) 353.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Calvin Miller, *The Sermon Maker: Tales of a Transformed Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 130.

<sup>13</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 20.

If preaching is to be biblical, the question is how to get the true message of the scripture. Preachers struggle to answer this question on Sunday mornings. Preachers also face the same question when they preach the text of miracle stories. However, preachers should focus on their listeners without losing their commitment to the Scripture. They should talk about the bible to the people. In preaching miracle stories, preachers should deliver the messages of miracle text with relevance. From the listeners' side, they will say, "The Lord wants me to live by this message today."

### **The Background and Purpose of This Thesis-Project**

Most of the pastors in Chinese-Indonesian churches have done their graduate studies, especially studies of hermeneutics and homiletics, in the West directly or through the Western-educated professors who teach in the Indonesian seminaries. Since the studies of hermeneutics and homiletics have been "imported" from Western scholars, it is necessary for Chinese-Indonesian pastors, scholars, and preachers to formulate preaching methods that are relevant and contextual to Chinese-Indonesian churches, especially on how to preach miracle stories of the Gospel. In spite of hermeneutics and homiletics originating mostly from the West, the method of biblical and relevant preaching is a struggle that must be faced by pastors in Chinese-Indonesian churches.

Another important aspect of this thesis project is its practice and relevancy to Chinese-Indonesian churches. I serve a local church in Indonesia. The church where I serve is a church with a strong Chinese background. In my ministry, I often hear

sermons with wrong interpretations of miracle texts and its application from the pulpit. The interactions with churchgoers and sermon-hearers, mostly, have given me insights as into their concept about miracle stories of the gospels. Contrary to the debates in the western world, the Chinese-Indonesian have two outstanding questions of miracles: will Jesus do the same miracle in this age, and do we, as the children of God, have the ability to do miracles like Jesus?

This motivates me to write this thesis-project with the title: Preaching the Miracle Stories of the Gospel in a Chinese-Indonesian Context.

### **Methodology and Outline**

In order to achieve the purposes above, I have constructed this thesis-project in five chapters. Chapter one presents and explains the purpose of the thesis. In chapter two, Theological Framework, I have built the theological foundation. Based on the title of the thesis project, the study of this chapter is on the message of the gospel.

In chapter three, Literature Review, I examine the writings that provide guidance on the interpretation of the text of miracle stories, especially in the gospel. I also looked into literature of homiletics, especially about the handling of miracle texts in the gospels and all components that will be useful for preaching Jesus' miracle stories. The last resource is the interview result from local pastors. I interviewed 5 pastors from different churches to gauge what they know concerning the preaching of miracle texts of the Gospel. Their experience in the pastoral ministry provides valuable insights to enrich

the studies of preaching, especially for the miracle texts of the Gospel. These will also help others who use this thesis project.

In Chapter four, I construct a manual on how to do a step-by-step development of a miracle sermon. This manual is prepared for pastors in a Chinese-Indonesian context to be used as a manual in preparing and delivering sermons from the miracle texts of the Gospel. From the manual, I develop a sermon from a miracle text as an example of preaching miracle texts of the Gospel.

In Chapter five, I describe the feedback I have received from the local pastors in Chinese-Indonesian churches and reflect what I have learned from this project. I also include suggestions for further studies related to the preaching miracle stories.

The appendix includes the sample sermons from miracle texts of the Gospels and the full text of interviews I have conducted with five local pastors in Surabaya.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Introduction

The miracle stories of the Gospels are one of the parts of the Bible that need to be preached biblically. Before the preacher stands behind the pulpit and preaches the story, it is a must to have a basic insight and knowledge of the four Gospels. Just as the first step of the old rabbit dish recipe in Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching* is to "first catch the rabbit," the significance of basic insights of miracles stories in the four Gospels is the first priority in developing the Biblical sermon. According to Haddon Robinson expository preaching is "the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through *a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context*, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers."<sup>1</sup> This definition confirms that it is a must for every preacher to have the historical, grammatical, and literary knowledge of the passages he will preach.

This chapter will present a theological framework of the miracle stories in the Gospels. I will begin this chapter by defining the Greek words for 'miracle' in the Gospels. The theology of miracles in each of the Gospels will be presented in the next section. The different emphasis of the theology of the person and the work of Jesus will

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<sup>1</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 21. Emphasis mine.

determine the message of the expositor's sermon. For example, we find the story of Jesus feeding five thousand in each of the four Gospels, but each author of the Gospel has his own message and theological view on this event. A preacher could preach four sermons from each Gospel with four different messages.

The two last parts of this chapter are about the relevancy of miracles for today and the conclusion. "Have the Miracles Ceased Today?" will look at the relevancy of miracle signs and events for today church. This will explain my position. In the conclusion, I will summarize and conclude the significant points of this chapter.

### **The Gospel Terms for Miracle**

Miracle stories are recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament, miracle stories are recorded more frequently in the Gospels than in the other books. The New Testament, especially the Gospels, uses four words for miracles: δυνάμις (dunamis): power, τέρας (teras): wonder, ἔργον (ergon): work, and σημεῖον (sēmeion): signs.

δυνάμις (*dunamis*): power

BAGD Lexicon defines *dunamis* as: "1. Power, might, strength, receive power. 2. Ability, capability. 3. Meaning. 4. Of the outward expressions of power: deed of power, miracle, wonder. 5. Of the externals of powers: have few resources. 6. Power as a

personal supernatural spirit or angel. 7. That which gives power.”<sup>2</sup> Betz applies this word to the power of God: the heavenly power, miraculous power, and the power which brings salvation to completion.<sup>3</sup>

In the Gospels, we find no mention of this word in the Gospel of John.<sup>4</sup> In the Synoptic Gospel, when this word is used to describe Jesus, it shows him as the representative of God who subdues the strong man, i.e. the devil. In Luke, we find that this power was linked with the Holy Spirit. So, this miracle Christ performs is evidence from God that Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

In the entire Synoptic Gospels, the word for miracle is *dunamis*, “powerful deeds,” but Luke stresses that the deeds are the result of the *dunamis*, “power.”<sup>6</sup> His activity is the exercise of power in relation to the demonic powers of the world. He has His power in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit and power being indissolubly related for Luke . . . The Spirit, who makes it plain that His existence is from God and who unites His existence with God, includes endowment with power in this origin of His existence and

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 812.

<sup>3</sup> O. Betz, “δυναμις” in *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:601-606.

<sup>4</sup> Graham H. Twelftree comments that the omission of this word in John’s vocabulary is not a denial to Jesus’ powerful ability but serves to draw attention to the powerful work of God and not the personal power of Jesus. *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 225. In other words, John is consistent with his portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God or he is identifying Jesus as God.

<sup>5</sup> O. Betz, “δυναμις” in *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:601-606.

<sup>6</sup> B. L. Blackburn, “Miracle and Miracle Stories” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 551.

union of His existence. As the essence of God is power, so endowment with power is linked with the gift of His Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

τερας (*teras*): wonder

The BAGD Lexicon defines *teras* as: “*prodigy, portent, omen, wonder*” and this word is usually combined with *sēmeion*.<sup>8</sup> This word is found 16 times in the NT, predominantly in Paul (9 times). This word is used 3 times in the Gospels (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:48). All occurrences refer to the same statement of Christ about end-time false Christs and false prophets. This word is not used by the Synoptic writers to refer to anything done by Jesus.

Rengstorf tells us that this word was rarely used in the time period of the New Testament outside of the practicing Jewish culture. But to devout Jews of the New Testament times, this word was well-known and, “it [*teras*] had at this time been given a special accent referring it to God’s self-revelation as the Creator and the Governor of all events, and especially of the destiny of the people chosen by Him.”<sup>9</sup> However, in contrast to *dunamis* and *sēmeion*, *teras* most often stressed miraculous acts of God as the Father—head of the Trinity, God as the creator of the supernatural, not Jesus nor the Holy Spirit. We may say that *teras* is ‘a miraculous event that was performed by God Himself.’

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Grundmann, “*dunamai*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 2:284-317

<sup>8</sup> Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 208-209.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “*teras*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 8: 124.

It is also interesting that *teras* never occurs by itself, without the word *sēmeion*. Every occurrence in the New Testament of *teras* is combined with *sēmeion*. However, *sēmeion* occurs by itself many times. This implies that *teras* is something that God chooses to perform in conjunction with signs. We can assume that *teras* means something like 'a miraculous act that God performs together with a sign.'

#### εργον (*ergon*): work

The BAGD Lexicon defines *ergon* as: "1. deed, action. 1b. manifestation, practical proof. 2. Work, occupation. 3. Of that which is brought into being by work. 4. Weakened to thing."<sup>10</sup> Georg Bertram said that this word "... denotes action or active zeal in contrast to idleness, or useful activity in contrast to useless busyness, or any kind of active work. ... denotes an 'action,' 'work' or 'achievement,' which more or less covers the various senses of the Greek term."<sup>11</sup>

This word and its variants occurs 27 times in John, 19 of which refers to the work of Jesus. Whenever John uses this word to describe Jesus, it refers to the work that He had been doing in context of his relationship with the Father (cf. John 5:36). Peter Riga found that in the Septuagint this word is used to refer to the work God did on behalf of His people, especially in His creation (Gen. 2:2) and His salvation through the exodus (Ex. 34:1; Pss. 66:5; 77:12).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 307-308.

<sup>11</sup> Rengstorf, "teras", 124.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Riga, "Signs of Glory, The Use of 'Semeion' in St. John's Gospel," *Interpretation* 17 (1963), 419.

George Eldon Ladd gives an excellent explanation of these words:

The *ergon* of Jesus are his deeds, primarily his miraculous deeds (5:20). Although the word *erga* is not used clearly with the reference to nonmiraculous works, it is likely that such nonmiraculous deeds are included, because *erga* is used of good or bad deeds of the Jews that show them to be either children of Abraham or children of the devil (8:39, 41). . . . *erga* designates the basic quality of one's life manifested by his or her conduct. So Jesus' deeds reflect the fact that the Father is present in them (10:32). They are in fact the works of God himself (10:37-38), for God is present and active in Jesus (14:10). These works bear witness to the fact that Jesus is the one sent by God (5:36; 10:25). Such works should lead those who witness them to faith in Jesus (10:38; 14:11). . . . *ergon* can be used with reference to the entire life mission of Jesus. His real food is to accomplish the work of God (4:34). At the end, he is conscious of having accomplished his work (17:4).<sup>13</sup>

So, we may conclude the meaning of *ergon* based on the comment of Twelftree:

"... in having Jesus identify his activity as 'works,' John is *identifying* Jesus and God. In the work of Jesus, particularly His miracles, *God himself* is creatively at work to save his people. Also, in using *ergon* for the miracles, there is a slight possibility that John may be preserving the authentic voice of Jesus, for the Synoptics also use *ergon* of his miracles."<sup>14</sup>

#### σημειον (*sēmeion*): signs

This word is found 77 times in the NT, predominantly in the Gospels (48 times) and Acts (13 times), but also in Paul (8 times), Hebrews (1 time) and Revelation (7 times). The BAGD Lexicon defines *sēmeion* as: "1. The *sign* or *distinguishing mark* by which something is known, *token*, *indication*. 2. A *sign* consisting of a *wonder* or *miracle*, an event that is contrary to usual course of nature. 2a. *Miracle* of divine origin, performed by God himself, by Christ, or by men of God. 2b. *Miracle* of a demonic

<sup>13</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 309.

<sup>14</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 225. Emphasize mine.

nature, worked by Satan and his agents. 2c. Terrifying appearances in heavens, never before seen, as *portents* of the last days Luke 21:11, 25.”<sup>15</sup> For Hofius, the basic meaning of this word is a sign (as a rule, visually perceived, but occasionally also heard) by which one recognizes a particular person or thing, a confirmatory, corroborative, authenticating mark or token.<sup>16</sup> For Rengstorf, its reference is to disclosure as the indispensable presupposition of all knowledge without requiring explanation or interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

This word is solely used in the Gospel of John. It is never used in the Synoptic Gospels. An example of this word’s usage can be seen in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand in John 6. As noted by John, “After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world’.”<sup>18</sup> This word confirms the identity of the one who brings the sign.

This word is different in meaning and usage than other words for miracles. Alan Culpepper said:

Unlike symbols, signs more or less arbitrarily stand for or point to something other than themselves. There is no intrinsic connection between a sign and the thing or person to which it points. The meaning of the sign must be learned, and whereas a symbol may point to many things, to be effective, a sign can point to only one.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 747-748.

<sup>16</sup> O. Hofius, “σημεῖον” in *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:622-633.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “Sēmeion” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 7:243-57.

<sup>18</sup> John 6:14.

<sup>19</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 182.

The sign is not a marvel for its own sake. In the words of Barrett, it is "... a symbolic anticipation or showing forth of a greater reality of which the *sēmeion* is nevertheless itself a part."<sup>20</sup>

John Frame said that these words have different emphasis: *dunamis* emphasizes God's control, *sēmeion* emphasizes God's authority, and *teras* emphasizes God's presence.<sup>21</sup> Following his analysis, we may say *ergon* emphasizes God's work.

In these miracle words of the New Testament, we can, therefore, conclude that: first, the subject or miracle worker is God himself. God is the miracle worker and man is only his instruments through whom miracles are manifested. The miracle worker is the most important one, not the instrument. For this reason, no one can claim to be a miracle worker. Man is only an instrument. The instrument can do nothing without the worker.

Second, all kinds of miracle manifestation is always related with the purpose of the miracle worker, God. Each miracle cannot be interpreted according to the instrument's point of view or the perspective of the people involved in the miracle. If you wish to find the meaning and intent of the miracle, you have to see it from the angle of the miracle worker. Therefore, the question that should be addressed is, "What does God want to say through this event?", not "What should we do for a miracle to happen?"

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<sup>20</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (London: SPCK, 1978), 76.

<sup>21</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 258.

Third, the use of different words by the Gospel writers shows that each of them has a particular intent in presenting the miracle stories. This means that to understand a particular miracle story in a Gospel, you have to read it from the writer's perspective, even if the same miracle story can be found in another Gospel written with its own purpose and intent.

### **The Meaning and Purpose of Miracles According to the Four Gospels**

In this section, we will see how the different authors of the Gospels give different emphasis to each story. This uniqueness is useful to reach and relate to the different audiences that the Gospels are intended to reach.

#### **Matthew**

In order to understand the intended meanings of miracle stories in the Gospel of Matthew, we have to know to whom the gospel was addressed and the purpose for which it was written. Generally, New Testament scholars agree "the author [of Matthew] was a Jew writing for Jews."<sup>22</sup> Even the beginning of this Gospel, the genealogy of Jesus, reveals its intended audience, Jews. For the Jews, genealogies were important and played an especially significant role in their lives and history. Michael J. Wilkins notes:

According to the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Chron. 1-9), God's people kept extensive genealogies, which served as a record of a family's descendants but were also used for practical and legal purposes to establish a person's heritage,

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 32.

inheritance, legitimacy, and rights. Knowledge of one's descendants was especially necessary, if a dispute occurred, to ensure that property went to the right person.<sup>23</sup>

In his genealogy, Matthew places special emphasis on the covenants made with Israel, revealed by the opening verse of his Gospel, "a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham," by tracing Jesus' lineage to David (1:6) and Abraham (1:2). Matthew intends to demonstrate Jesus' legal claim to the throne of David.<sup>24</sup> The promises in 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalms 89:19-29, 35-37; 110:1-7; 132:11-12 have been fulfilled with the birth of Jesus.

The opening verse containing the name of David and Abraham proves that this Gospel is written for the Jews and is intended to show that the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament have been fulfilled. The use of the word 'Christ' in the opening verse resonates with Biblical nuances. For the meaning of word 'Christ' in the Old Testament, D. A. Carson said:

Christ is roughly the Greek equivalent to "Messiah" or Anointed." In the OT the term could refer to a variety of people "anointed" for some special function: priests (Lev. 4:3; 6:22), kings (1 Sam. 16:13; 24:10; 2 Sam. 19:21; Lam. 4:20), and metaphorically, the patriarchs (Ps. 105:15) and the pagan king Cyrus (Isa. 45:1). Already in Hannah's prayer "Messiah" parallels "king": the Lord "will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed" (1 Sam. 2:10). With the rising number of OT prophecies concerning King's David's line (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:12-16; cf. Ps. 2:2; 105:15), "Messiah," or "Christ," became the designation of a figure representing the people of God and bringing in the promised eschatological reign.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 61.

It is apparent that the first verse of the Gospel of Matthew reveals that the Gospel is addressed to the Jews and intends to provide confirmation to the Jewish audience that Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that the Prophets of old spoke about so many times. Merrill C. Tenney says that the Gospel of Matthew was written to show how Jesus of Nazareth enlarged and explained revelations that had begun in the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup>

To support the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies, there are at least sixty obvious examples, taken between Matthew 1:23-27:48. Most of them are drawn from Isaiah and the Psalms, yet the Old Testament as a whole is represented. Furthermore, many of the passages include references to “the fulfillment” of the words of the prophets. Jesus’ career was more than a series of marvelous, historical events; it was “the fulfillment of the divine purpose in the promised Messiah.”<sup>27</sup> However, although the gospel of Matthew begins with a particularism (Jewish), the book ends on a note of universalism with the sending of the disciples to preach the Gospel throughout the world. The author’s main purpose is to show Christianity to be much more inclusive than Judaism.<sup>28</sup>

Similar to the original recipients of the gospel, the first miracle that God performs in the gospel of Matthew is especially relevant culturally to its recipients. The first miracle recorded in Matthew is the cleansing of a leper, found in Matthew 8:3. For

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<sup>26</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, rev. sub. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 156.

<sup>27</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 32-33.

the Jews, this miracle is special and unique. Every Jew who read this story would have in their mind the Old Testament laws of Moses which state that leprosy is a symbol of uncleanness, or sin. Due to their condition, lepers . . . “were barred from Jerusalem and from all walled towns. In the synagogue there was provided for him a little isolated chamber, ten feet high and six feet wide, . . . Even in an open place it was illegal to greet a leper. If the wind was blowing upwind, you could not come closer than six feet to a leper. If the wind was blowing downwind, you had to stay at least 150 feet away.”<sup>29</sup> Simply put, a leper was the same as an unclean person and was not allowed into the presence of God. Similarly, all people are said to be unclean due to our sinful natures. This first miracle in the Gospel of Matthew shows the Jews that Jesus came to make a person clean from sin and, in doing so, reunites the cleansed man with the Holy God.

In order to convince his Jewish audience of the miracle of Jesus and events around it, Matthew pays special attention to the presence of witnesses. This confirmation is needed to fulfill the Old Testament conditions for the validity of the events. When Jesus heals the lepers in Matthew 8:1-4, he tells them to go to the priest and get a testimony and validity for their cleanliness, in accordance to the law of Moses.<sup>30</sup> For the Gentiles who have different traditions, they do not have the customs or commandments to verify the event.

The last miracle recorded in Matthew is the cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:18-22). This event occurs when Jesus and his disciples, while traveling from Bethany to

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<sup>29</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1*. rev. upd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 342.

<sup>30</sup> Leviticus 14.

Jerusalem, pass through the little village of Bethphage. The appearance of leaves on a fig tree in this region is a promise of the sweet early fig. But this tree is not productive, bearing no figs at all. This becomes an appropriate metaphor for Jesus to use to indicate Israel's spiritual condition,<sup>31</sup> providing a striking lesson for the disciples. Just as the fig tree's fruitfulness is a sign of its health, fruitfulness is a sign of Israel's faithfulness to the covenantal standards. The cursing of the tree, then, is the same as the judgment of God over someone who lives in sin. Now that Israel, especially under its religious leadership, has perverted the temple practices and has not repented at the appearance of Jesus the Messiah proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, Israel is being judged by God.<sup>32</sup>

The placement of those events at the beginning and the end of Matthew's gospel shows that Jesus' coming fulfills the prophecy of the Old Testament. Nobody has ability to heal leprosy except the One whose coming was prophesied by the prophets. However, He did not come simply to help his people, but also to judge those who have not repented. They may hope to receive help and comforts from their Messiah, but also have to repent and bear fruit in their lives. The miracle in these events shows us that no one can do these two things, to help and to judge, except the Messiah. He will deliver humans from the curse of sin, but he will also judge (and curse) humans who live in sin.

In other words, the purpose of the miracle stories in the Gospel of Matthew is to present and confirm Jesus as the Son of David and the Messiah who was prophesied by

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hos. 9:10, where Israel is compared to a fruitful fig tree. Fig tree also represents the new messianic age, when God's reign is established fully (cf. Zech. 3:10; Mic. 4:4).

<sup>32</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 693-94.

the Old Testament prophets. Matthew's use of miracles seems to be directed more as a proof of Jesus' Messianic power rather than to advance a narrative, although Matthew duplicates many stories that appear in Mark and Luke.<sup>33</sup> The Messianic messages invite the readers of the Gospel to come to Jesus and he will give them rest (Matt 11:30) and also judgment for who do not believe in him (Matt 19:28).

Graham Twelftree comments on what Jesus did in Matthew as the culmination of the names that were given to him:

But the Jesus of the miracles in Matthew is not only the Son of David or the Son of God, beloved and pleasing to God, or anointed Spirit, having a great following and able to heal. He is also *God* himself acting mightily among his people and able to heal. So Jesus is astoundingly effective not because of what he says or does but because his simple authority arises out of who he is. Yet he is not a self-seeking, triumphant miracle worker but a humble servant acting out compassion and associating with outsiders and outcasts.<sup>34</sup>

## Mark

The Gospel of Action<sup>35</sup> is the best title for the Gospel of Mark. His focus on the acts of Jesus are shown from chapter one, with a very short prologue in the beginning and (almost) no introduction to the book. Matthew recorded many of Jesus' teachings, but Mark just recorded only a few of them. However, considering that Mark is the shortest Gospel, it gives the most space to the miracle stories. Mark records at least 20 occasions of Jesus' miracles, out of a total of 35. Plainly, Mark is more interested in Jesus' actions than his words. Mark devotes his attention to the action of Jesus and the

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<sup>33</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 157.

<sup>34</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 140. Emphasize mine.

<sup>35</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 61.

results of his action. The theme words of Mark are “immediately”, “straightaway”, and “it came to pass”, all action and event words given to lead and direct people into action.

Mark introduces his Gospel using three aspects of Jesus’ life. First, he begins with the ultimate identity: “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” and supports this claim with a short prophecy from the Old Testament and the role of John the Baptist on his mission. He moves very quickly to the second part: the baptism of Jesus. He also supports his claim in verse one with a noted claim from God, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Once again, Mark moves on very rapidly to the third part: the calling of the first disciples. It is as if he wants to say to his readers, “Okay, I think the introduction is enough and now we go on to the ‘real’ story.”

Some commentators on this Gospel believe that the Gospel of Mark was written for Romans and Christians in Rome.<sup>36</sup> Considering this audience, we understand why Mark did not put in many things about the Jews, because he did not write it for Jews. It is appropriate to say “the purpose of this Gospel seems to be primarily evangelistic. It is an attempt to bring the person and work of Christ before the public as a new message, “the gospel,” without assuming much knowledge of theology or of Old Testament teaching on part of the hearer.”<sup>37</sup>

The setting of the Gospel also helps us to understand the function of miracle stories in this Gospel. The supremacy as a Miracle Worker and Son of God has significant meaning for the non-Christians and Christians in Rome. The miracle stories in

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<sup>36</sup> Among them is Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 71-75 & David Garland, *Mark*, NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 28-31.

<sup>37</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 171.

Mark show the non-Christian Romans who Jesus is and remind the persecuted Christians for whom they were being persecuted. That is why Mark recorded so many miracle stories in his Gospel.

Due to this special characteristic, Mark is the fastest in recording the first miracle story in his Gospel. We need only to read 21 verses of this Gospel to find Jesus' first miracle story: an exorcism at the synagogue. The recording of this event (and other miracle stories) is also intended to show another kind of supremacy. Jesus' miracles are closely connected to the proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. Jesus' exorcisms are to be construed as successful attacks of the reign of God against the kingdom of Satan.<sup>38</sup> "They knew that Jesus was believed by some at least to be the Messiah; they knew that the reign of the Messiah was the end of the demons; and the man who believed himself to be possessed spoke as a demon when he came into the presence of Jesus."<sup>39</sup> In the context of the recipients, it shows the supremacy of the kingdom of God over kingdoms and nations all over the world.

This story also counters the myth existing in the Greco-Roman world that heroes who die can become demigods and demigods Heroes<sup>40</sup>:

... it is indisputable that the cry of the demons to Jesus is unusual in comparison to other heroes' exorcism stories. The cosmic authority of Jesus on earth is clearly attested. His power to effect a destruction of the demons illustrates the

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<sup>38</sup> Blackburn, "Miracle and Miracle Stories," 551.

<sup>39</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark*, rev. upd. ed. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews, 2001), 39.

<sup>40</sup> Wendy Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the Study of New Testament Miracle Stories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 78.

Christian community's keen sense of the Endtime that hovers on the breath of the age.<sup>41</sup>

The sphere of this messianic power can be seen in how Mark structured the four miracle stories in the second part of the Galilean ministry (3:13–5:43). The section comes to a climax with four miracles, each of them representing a type of Jesus' miracles—the calming of a storm (a nature miracle, 4:35-41); the casting out of a “legion” of demons from a man in the region of the Gerasenes (an exorcism, 5:1-20); the healing of a woman with a flow of blood (a healing, 5:25-34); and the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead (a resurrection, 5:21-24, 35-43).<sup>42</sup>

Mark recorded a unique response as Jesus performed each miracle. Mark is the only gospel that records Jesus' commands to keep a miracle secret.<sup>43</sup> However, people kept talking about it regardless. The disobedience of the people resulted in a frustration of Jesus' plans, namely, to preach in other towns (cf. also Mark 7:24 with 7:36). Thus Mark may well have understood the four prohibitions in practical-strategic terms.<sup>44</sup>

The last miracle recorded in the Gospel of Mark is of Jesus cursing the fig tree, similar to the Gospel of Matthew. It is interesting to find the story of Jesus cleansing the temple in Mark breaks the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree. It looks like the focus of Mark's attention is on the temple rather than on the city where Jesus arrives (Mark

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<sup>41</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 170.

<sup>43</sup> Mark 1:43-45; 3:11-13; 7:31-37; 8:29-31.

<sup>44</sup> For more complete explanation about this prohibition, see David Garland, *Mark*, 76-77.

11:11, 15, 27).<sup>45</sup> It appears that Mark wished for his readers to understand the story of Jesus cleansing the temple as a unit with Jesus cursing the fig tree. There seems to be a special message that he wanted to convey by this arrangement.

This arrangement is meant to link the accounts. The temple cleansing is sandwiched between two incidents of the fig tree, an arrangement meant to link the accounts. The judgment symbolized by the cursing of the fig tree is initiated by Jesus' cleansing of the temple.<sup>46</sup> For Garland, this event refers to the cross when Jesus dies:

In Jesus' day the temple had become a nationalistic symbol that served only to divide Israel from the nations. If it were to become what God intended, 'a house of prayer for all nations,' walls would have to crumble. Indeed, walls will soon collapse and barriers will be breached. When Jesus dies, the temple veil is split from top to bottom, and a Gentile confesses that he is the Son of God (15:38-39).<sup>47</sup>

The message of the (eschatological) judgment is important for Mark and that is why he arranges this miracle to be the last miracle story he reports. Like Matthew, the fig tree is a symbol for the nation of Israel, which is not producing the fruit sought by God.<sup>48</sup> The cursing of the fig tree,<sup>49</sup> similar to the cleansing of the temple, may

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<sup>45</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Walter W. Wessel, *Mark*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 727.

<sup>47</sup> Garland, *Mark*, 438.

<sup>48</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> R. T. France found that the focus on the temple and the link to the cursing of the fig tree may be found in narrative sequence as follows:

- A First visit to the *temple* (11:11)
- B Cursing of the *fig tree* (11:12-14)
- A Jesus takes action in the *temple* (11:15-19)
- B The *fig tree* is found to be dead (11:20-25)
- A Jesus returns to the temple (11:27)

symbolize the future judgment for Israel. For Mark, "Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is to be associated with the view that Israel had failed to produce what Messiah was looking for."<sup>50</sup>

Considering that Jesus is the Son of God, Mark wants his readers to have faith in God (11:22), that is "faith in God that produces the fruit of recognizing who Jesus is."<sup>51</sup> It is not enough for believers to know Jesus is the Son of God; they must prove what they know through actions, by producing the fruit God asks for.

In Mark, we find that the author puts the focus on Jesus as the Son of God who has power over Satan, demons, nature, human beings, illness and death. The presentation of Jesus' figure in this manner demands the response of his followers to live and do what he commands and asks. Whoever ignores his commandments will receive eschatological consequences.

## Luke

Although the Gospels of Luke and Mark have the same miracle first, the Gospel of Luke pays special attention in providing accurate reports about who is Jesus to Theophilus (Luke 1:1-5). Some have supposed that 'Theophilus' is a coined name to represent any 'lover of God,' but it is much more natural to regard him as a real person.

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R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*. New International Commentary on the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 436.

<sup>50</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 91.

<sup>51</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 92.

He was a Gentile and this suggests that the gospel was primarily designed for all people in a similar category.<sup>52</sup>

Luke documents the genealogy of Jesus as Matthew did in his gospel, but the two genealogies differ in several ways:

1. Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy, thereby establishing an immediate connection with the OT and with Israel. Luke waits until the significant part of the ministry of John the Baptist is completed and Jesus stands alone as the designated Son of God.
2. Matthew begins with Abraham, stressing Jesus' Jewish ancestry; Luke, in reverse order, goes back to Adam, probably with the intent of stressing Jesus' identification with the entire human race.
3. Matthew groups his names symmetrically; Luke simply lists them.
4. Both trace the lineage back through ancestral lines that diverge for a number of generations from Luke's, though both meet at the generation of David.
5. Matthew includes the names of several women (a feature one might have expected of Luke because of his understanding and respect for women).<sup>53</sup>

Considering the data above, we may say that Luke probably wants to emphasize Jesus as a member of the human race (from the term 'son of Adam') and the Son of God (from the term 'Son of God' and also from the placement of the genealogy after the baptism signifying Jesus as the Son of God).

Like Mark, the first miracle story in Luke is the exorcism at the synagogue in Capernaum. To understand this event, the readers need to understand the previous event. In the first ministry of Jesus, Luke presents the story in Nazareth when Jesus reads the scripture of Isaiah. After this event, he continues his story with the exorcism. From the beginning, Luke wishes to present the two natures of Jesus as a Spirit-anointed

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<sup>52</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 108-109.

<sup>53</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 861.

healer and as a teacher.<sup>54</sup> Referring to the previous passages, he wishes to present Jesus as both the Son of Man and the Son of God.

The first miracle takes place in a synagogue where a man possessed by a demon cries out and knows him as “of Nazareth” and “the Holy One of God.” It gives the impression that Luke uses this event to support his claim that Jesus is the Son of Man and the Son of God. Also, this statement from the possessed man, “Have you come to destroy us?” gives the impression that Jesus is the anointed one who has great power.

However, what is interesting here is that we do not hear the demon cry out after Jesus rebukes him, like we do in Mark.<sup>55</sup> The demon cries out when Jesus comes and challenges Jesus. In contrast to the Gospel of Mark, Luke records that the demon does not cry out when Jesus rebukes him. Mark shows the demon causing the man to undergo convulsions (Mark 1:26), while Luke shows that the demon did the man no harm, as he states in 4:35, “threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.” This gives the impression that Luke wants to present Jesus as the person who possesses a tremendous power to control everything, including things in the spirit world. Darrell Bock said, “He possesses command over the world of evil. The evil forces obey him, even while they dominate people. Jesus’ first miracle, appropriately enough, is against the forces of evil, for he offers that which is good and holy to humanity.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Mark 1:26: “The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” It is fitting with the characteristic of Mark to pay attention to the action and reaction.

<sup>56</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 435.

Luke wanted to bring out a parallel between miracles, which brought Israel out of bondage, and the mighty works by which the 'stronger man' of the new exodus despoiled Satan of his captives.<sup>57</sup> It means that, in the story of the woman with a spirit of infirmity, freedom from the spirit symbolizes being released from Satan's bindings.<sup>58</sup>

Luke has a special perspective on how he treats exorcisms in his gospel. Although Mark put these stories in the first half of his gospel, Luke balances Jesus' exorcisms with the other aspects of his ministry. Implicitly, Luke wants to show the significance of exorcism and dealing with demonic spirits as an integral part of Jesus' ministry in order to produce a balance.<sup>59</sup>

Luke's special perspective on exorcisms is also found in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Luke uses the word "rebuked" (*epetimēsen*: he rebuked) when he stands over Peter's mother-in-law. This word is used when Jesus confronts demonic sickness. It gives the impression of the presence of a "demonic force" as opposed to possession.<sup>60</sup> However, Luke does not use this word in 6:18: "and those who were oppressed with unclean spirits were healed." Twelftree suggest that Luke does not use this word to show that all illnesses are caused by demons. Luke "... in effect gives all sickness a demonic and cosmic dimension; in all healings God's adversary is being

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<sup>57</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975), 46.

<sup>58</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 177.

<sup>59</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 175-76.

<sup>60</sup> So John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 35a (Dallas: Word, 1989), 211-212. Bock rejects the idea of an exorcism here, "... if this is an exorcism, Luke has not pointed it out by the form." Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 436-37.

subdued and the person released is as a prisoner from jail.”<sup>61</sup> It looks like Luke aims to describe a balance among various miracles of Jesus by recasting the stories and increasing the significance of the exorcisms.<sup>62</sup>

The balance in Jesus’ ministry (preaching the kingdom of God,<sup>63</sup> healing,<sup>64</sup> and exorcising<sup>65</sup>) also may be found in Jesus’ word and deed. The last miracle of the gospel, the healing of the high priest’s servant’s ear, reveals this balance to the readers.<sup>66</sup> He, who taught his followers to love their enemies, now practices his word. Considering how the disciples call him “Master,” this story depicts Jesus not only as the Master but also as a man of compassion. He, who possesses great power to perform miracles, also has tremendous love for his enemies. He uses his miraculous power to show his miraculous love to his enemy by healing him. There is no one who can do this except the one who has been filled by the Spirit.

Of course, Luke does not think that the miracle is the evidence of Jesus’ love.

The miracle activities of Jesus may refer to the prophecy of the Messiah in Isaiah 35:4-6:

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<sup>61</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 176.

<sup>62</sup> M. D. Goulder, as quoted by Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 425, shows this balance by the chiastic of Luke 4:31-44:

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|----|---------------------|
| a  | teaching (4:31-32)  |
| b  | exorcism (4:33-37)  |
| c  | healing (4:38-39)   |
| c' | healing (4:40)      |
| b' | exorcism (4:41)     |
| a' | preaching (4:42-44) |

<sup>63</sup> E.g., Luke 4:43.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., Luke 4:18, 40.

<sup>65</sup> E.g., Luke 4:31-41.

<sup>66</sup> Luke 22:50-51.

“your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” He presents the two natures of the Messiah, “Son of God,” exemplified by his miraculous power, and “Son of Man,” exemplified by his miraculous love. Later in Acts, Luke says through Peter that the days of Pentecost portray that Jesus is “a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him.”<sup>67</sup>

Luke presents the miracle stories with a different emphasis compared to other Gospel writers. If Matthew and Mark give a warning of judgment from God in the last part of their Gospels, Luke offers a grace of God to those who believe in him. Twelftree said:

Through his arrangement of the material, Luke has made a distinctive impact on the miracle traditions about Jesus. . . . We have seen that he has replaced the harsh story of the cursing of the fig tree with the story of grace about Jesus weeping for Jerusalem. Indeed, Luke records no punitive miracle at the hand of the earthly Jesus. He clearly distinguishes between the offer of grace in Jesus and the coming judgment of God. Jesus offers grace in his miracles rather than divine punishment.<sup>68</sup>

#### John

The Gospel of John is the most different gospel among the Canonic gospels. In the Gospel of John, we do not find parables, exorcisms, healing of lepers, infancy narratives, the temptation of Jesus, the transfiguration, the Sermon on the Mount, the

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<sup>67</sup> Acts 2:22.

<sup>68</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 187-88.

Lord Supper. These facts show us that John, implicitly, has special intentions in presenting the story of Jesus.

John begins his gospel with the Logos,<sup>69</sup> a well-known philosophical and metaphysical concept in Hellenistic worlds. However, this Gospel also shows the author has knowledge of the Jewish background. He knows Jewish customs,<sup>70</sup> Jewish history<sup>71</sup> and Palestinian geography<sup>72</sup> well. Considering these facts, Carson and Moo said, "This gospel could help Jewish Christians witnessing to unconverted Jews and proselytes . . . John's gospel not only is evangelistic in its purpose but aims in particular to evangelize Diaspora Jews and Jewish proselytes."<sup>73</sup> George Beasley Murray said the purpose of John's Gospel is "to evangelize Jews, to evangelize Hellenists, to strengthen the church, to catechize new converts, to provide materials for the evangelization of Jews, and so forth."<sup>74</sup> It looks like the goal is fitting with John's purpose of writing the gospel, as shown in John 20:31: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." We may say that through the widest possible circulation, the Gospel of John is written primarily to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God.

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<sup>69</sup> Jesus' birth is not mentioned to show Jesus is eternal.

<sup>70</sup> E.g., ritual scruples: purification sites (2:6), Feast of Tabernacles (8:12). He also mentions several Jewish feasts: Passover, Dedication, etc.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., the enmity between Jewish and Samaritans (4:9), Palestinians contempt for the Jews of the Dispersion (7:35).

<sup>72</sup> E.g., he knows the Hebrew name of a pool near the Sheep Gate and knows that it has five porches, mentions some places specifically: Bethany, Cana in Galilee, Tiberias, Sea of Galilee, etc.

<sup>73</sup> Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 270-71.

<sup>74</sup> As quoted by Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 270.

John records only seven miracles and five of them are not found in the other Gospels. Merrill C. Tenney makes a diagram of the seven miracles to show the areas of power of Jesus:<sup>75</sup>

TITLE	PASSAGE	AREA OF POWER
The Changing of Water into Wine	2:1-11	Quality
The Healing of the Nobleman's Son	4:46-54	Space
The Healing of the Impotent Man	5:1-9	Time
The Feeding of the Five thousand	6:1-14	Quantity
The Walking on the Water	6:16-21	Natural Law
The Healing of the Blind Man	9:1-12	Misfortune
The Raising of Lazarus	11:1-46	Death

What is interesting about these seven miracles is that they occur in areas where no man is able to influence any change of laws or conditions that affect his life. "In these areas Jesus proves himself potent where man is impotent, and the works that he did testify to his supernatural ability."<sup>76</sup>

The next feature in this Gospel is John's usage of the word *sēmeion* (sign). He uses *sēmeion* for the first time in John 2:11 to prove Jesus' deity. Also, what is interesting in the first miracle event is that the object of the miracle is not a man who suffers due to illnesses or demons, but takes place at a wedding party.

Gary M. Burge suggests that we have to read the Gospel of John, including the miracle stories, in a theological setting of Judaism.<sup>77</sup> It means that when modern readers read the story, they should read it with the view of the Jews. In the literature of

<sup>75</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 192.

<sup>76</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 193.

<sup>77</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 98-99.

Judaism, wedding banquets are pregnant with meaning. It suggests that John uses this event to symbolize something behind the clues he uses. There is a hidden meaning behind the stories.

In the Cana story, in the setting of the wedding banquet, the Jews may remember Isa. 25:6, “. . . a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.” It is not just a party but symbolizes the coming of the King Messiah. His coming will show the contrast between the old order and the newness he brings.<sup>78</sup> John uses this story as the first sign to proclaim the coming of the Messiah as prophesied in the Old Testament. John states through this event that The Messiah has arrived and the messianic banquet has begun. Also, through this story, John makes a firm statement that “the Messiah has not just appeared in Judaism amidst its festivities, he has come to fulfill and indeed upend what he finds there.”<sup>79</sup>

At a basic level, the transformation of water to wine, like the synoptic nature miracles, demonstrates Jesus’ unique control over natural order. Placing it as the first of Jesus’ miracles, however, indicates that something more is in mind. Jesus is inaugurating the new creation, replete with a messianic banquet (cf. Amos 9:11-15).<sup>80</sup> In connection to Judaism, Ladd says, “the turning of water into wine at Cana symbolizes

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<sup>78</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 192.

<sup>79</sup> Burge, *John*, 99.

<sup>80</sup> Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 34.

the sterility of Judaism (the empty water pots) and the new wine of messianic era (Mk. 2:22; Joel 2:24; Amos 9:1-13; Zech. 10:7)."<sup>81</sup>

In this first sign, the author of the fourth Gospel demands his readers to respond after they see (and read) the miraculous event performed by Jesus Christ. The Cana story "marks the beginning of a ministry accompanied by supernatural power; and it proves so convincingly to the new disciples that they 'put their faith in him.'"<sup>82</sup>

Now, like the first three Gospels, we will look at the last miracle story in John's Gospel. The last miracle in John is the raising of Lazarus. What is interesting here is that the events occurred between personal friends.<sup>83</sup> We may also see some interesting facts: the one who asks Jesus to do something is a woman and "in neither case does John portray Jesus as being moved to do anything."<sup>84</sup> Also, similar comments are said by Jesus about his time (John 2:4; 11:4).

Like the Cana story, and consistent with the purpose of this Gospel, the story of raising Lazarus from the dead is intended so that the readers "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 11:15).<sup>85</sup> The coming of Jesus on the fourth day is intended to show who he is. There is a well-known Jewish belief that the soul of a dead person remains in the vicinity of the body, "hoping to reenter it," for three days, but

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<sup>81</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 310.

<sup>82</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 43.

<sup>83</sup> Burge, *John*, 323.

<sup>84</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 215.

<sup>85</sup> John 2:11.

once decomposition sets in, the soul departs.<sup>86</sup> So John wants the readers to know that Lazarus is truly dead and that “the miracle of Jesus cannot be construed as a resuscitation.”<sup>87</sup>

Considering this background and the purpose of the Gospel, we may say that John wants his readers put their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Lord of life. George Eldon Ladd said:

The raising of Lazarus only illustrates the fact that the eternal life that is present in Jesus is, in fact, the life of the eschatological resurrection realized on the spiritual level in history (11:25). These miracles as a whole are the kind of miracles expected by the Jews with the dawn of the messianic age. This is analogous to Jesus’ answer in the Synoptic Gospels to the question of John’s disciples, in his works, the prophecies of the messianic Kingdom were being fulfilled (Mat. 11:2ff).<sup>88</sup>

As with the other mighty works, the clearest markers within the text point toward the eschatological intrusion of God’s kingdom into the world. Martha affirms that Lazarus will rise on the last day; Jesus counters that this future reality is already incipiently present in himself, the resurrection and the life (11:24-5). Jesus’ call to the entombed Lazarus is a clear echo of the prophecy of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 (underscored by the prior allusion to Ezekiel in John 5:28-9). But the magnitude of this miracle demands that the reader probe more deeply into Jesus’ identity and his relationship with the creator God. Lazarus has been dead for four days, so his call from

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<sup>86</sup> Burge, *John*, 315.

<sup>87</sup> Burge, *John*, 315.

<sup>88</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 310.

the grave is virtually a *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>89</sup> Again, chapter 5 of John provides the appropriate commentary: "Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has given to the Son to have life in himself." We are drawn thence back to the prologue: in him was life (1:4).<sup>90</sup>

However, the meaning of the story will be more visible if we continue our reading to verses 45-57, with Caiaphas plotting Jesus' death. It is ironic that Jesus gives life to the dead Lazarus and Caiaphas wants to take Jesus' life.<sup>91</sup> We may understand the significance of both events in the words of Caiaphas, "it is better for you that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish" (11:50). "The raising of Lazarus, the last sign in the ministry of Jesus, was to lead to his death on behalf of all (cf. Mark 10:45)."<sup>92</sup>

### **"Controversial" Passages**

Based on the explanations above, we know that the authors of the four Gospels, though they have different emphases, put focus on Jesus as the miracle worker and demand their reader to respond after they read and hear the works of Jesus. However, there are passages related to the topic of miracle stories in the Gospels that may

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<sup>89</sup> "Ex nihilo" is Latin for "from nothing." The term "creation ex nihilo" refers to God creating everything from nothing. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). Prior to that moment there was nothing. God didn't make the universe from preexisting building blocks. He started from scratch. <http://www.gotquestions.org/creation-ex-nihilo.html>.

<sup>90</sup> McDonough, *Christ as Creator*, 35-36.

<sup>91</sup> Burge, *John*, 322.

<sup>92</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 217.

suggest that the followers of Jesus are also to do the same things that Jesus did. This section will discuss those passages and their proper meanings.

#### Matthew 17:20

On the seventh day after the climatic events of Peter's confession and Jesus' first prediction of his suffering and death, the even more dramatic event of Jesus' transfiguration occurs. Jesus reveals his divine glory in this event with the appearance of Moses and Elijah.

Following this event, Matthew shows us how the ministry of John the Baptist fulfills the prophesied arrival of Elijah the prophet (17:9-13) and then, they come down the mountain of transfiguration to rejoin the remaining disciples. As they come down the mountain, a crowd has gathered because of an epileptic boy. Matthew says that the rest of the disciples could not heal him. It may be that the father sought help from the remaining disciples while Jesus was on the mountain with the inner three.

Jesus responds, "O unbelieving and perverse generation . . . how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" He continues with the sentences into verse 20, stating that the disciples just need faith as small as a mustard seed to do this miraculous thing. It looks like they simply need a "mustard" faith and then, they will be able to perform the miraculous deed, or something miraculous will happen upon them. The theological problem is "Does this verse place an emphasis on the role of faith in obtaining God's miraculous intervention?" or "Is faith a must-have factor to get what we want?"

To see the context more clearly, we have to remember that the remaining disciples were not with Jesus during the transfiguration. However, they were with Jesus before. They were together in chapter 16, in the same place and time, when Jesus reveals who the Son of Man is, and of course, they have heard Peter's confession of who Jesus is.

Following this event, Jesus tells them the first prediction of his suffering and resurrection. It happens in the same place and time. They heard what Jesus said to Peter (16:22-23). In this event, Jesus explains the cost of discipleship in following him. They need to obey him as the disciples.

Matthew continues his Gospel through the next six days without informing us of the condition of the six days they went through. Matthew simply informs us that an epileptic son's father comes to ask them for their help. The disciples cannot do what the father expects and Jesus tells them that they have no faith.

What Jesus means in this text is not about the amount of faith, but about possessing an effective faith. Considering the situations of the remaining disciples, they should have had the faith. What Jesus reveals six days before about himself and his explanation about his suffering and resurrection should have been enough for them to have the faith that Jesus intended.

The disciples had long been successful in their work, and now they are surprised by their failure. But their faith is poor and shoddy. The problem of the nine disciples is "they are treating the authority given them (10:1, 8) like a gift of magic, a bestowed

power that works *ex opere operato*.”<sup>93</sup> They do not have faith enough to the One who gives them authority to do this work.

Matthew does not explain their lack of faith, but R. T. France gives reasons for their lack of faith:

Perhaps they had become overconfident in the authority Jesus had given to them, so that they assumed they could carry out an exorcism as a matter of course; the added comment in Mark 9:29 . . . that “this kind will not come out except through prayer [and fasting]” implies that they had not prayed for God’s power over the demon. Or perhaps the problem was opposite, that in the absence of Jesus and the leading disciples up the mountain the remaining disciples did not have the faith to draw on God’s power for themselves, despite Jesus’ authorization, and their attempt had lacked conviction.<sup>94</sup>

I prefer the second one as the cause of their lack of faith because Jesus never withdraws the authority he has given them in 10:8. However, regardless of whether it is the first or the second reason, the disciples’ overconfidence or the absence of Jesus and the inner three, it still remains that they lack faith.

Michael Wilkins explained the meaning of faith in this context:

Faith is not a particular substance, the more of which the disciples have, the more they can accomplish. It is not a gift of magic that can be manipulated at will. Rather, faith is confidence that we can do what God calls us to do – it is “taking God at his word.” Therefore, the disciples should not place confidence in what they have but have confidence that if God calls them to do something, they can do it in his strength . . . Faith simply means that if God calls a person to do something, it will be accomplished through his power and the person’s obedience. Even the most absurd things from the world’s point of view can be accomplished if God calls us to do it.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 392.

<sup>94</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 662.

<sup>95</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 597.

Whatever the cause is for their lack of faith, the disciples are not taking God at his word. That is why they could not do this work.

#### Mark 16:17-18 (cf. Luke 10:17)

In the earliest and most reliable manuscripts, Mark's Gospel ends with verse 8. Such an abrupt ending has perplexed readers for centuries. Many argue that Mark would not have left the narrative hanging and must have continued with a fuller picture of what happened next.<sup>96</sup> However, this problem will not be discussed here because verses 9-20 of Mark 16 has become the conclusion of Mark's Gospel in many versions of the Bible. On the congregation's side, they just know that verses 17-18 are in their Bible and that the Bible is the Word of God. But let us assume, despite evidence to the contrary, that Mark 16:17-18 are a legitimate reflection of the original, inspired manuscripts. Does it teach that we should be handling snakes in church? Do believers get these signs after they believe in Christ?

Generally, there are two solutions offered for this passage. The first solution<sup>97</sup> considers the context in which these words are said: "And these signs will accompany those who believe." It means these things apply to those in the previous verse, "whoever believes." It is applied to the apostolic age, or first century A.D. The second

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<sup>96</sup> David Garland does a brilliant and comprehensive explanation about this topic on his Mark commentary in the NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) especially 615-618.

<sup>97</sup> E.g. John Oakes position on his article, "Why do some Christians believe Mark 16:15-16 is for us and Mark 16:17-18 is not for us but for the apostles?" in [https://www.evidenceforchristianity.org/index.php?option=com\\_custom\\_content&task=view&id=4697](https://www.evidenceforchristianity.org/index.php?option=com_custom_content&task=view&id=4697) (Accessed June 24, 2010).

solution<sup>98</sup> refers to the people who listened to this message directly, the apostles and first disciples. After Jesus says these words, he is taken up (v. 19) and the disciples “went” and “preached” (v. 20).<sup>99</sup> And indeed, the apostles performed all those signs and wonders. It means these signs are true for one certain group, the apostolic community.

The above solutions have answered the questions about to whom or when these miraculous signs may be applied. I do not argue with the solutions offered. However, we may need to ask why Jesus gave these signs to the disciples or the first believers. Considering this may help us to understand and apply this passage to the church today.

Mark called these miraculous things signs. A sign is something that signifies a greater meaning or that points (like a sign) to something much more important than the sign itself.<sup>100</sup> It means that there is a purpose to the signs and what God is using them to accomplish. Verse 20 says that after Jesus said these words and was taken up to heaven, “the disciples went out and preached everywhere and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”

What are the meanings of the words “confirmed” and “accompanied” here?

Reagan comments:

To confirm means to establish; to show to be valid; to prove the truth or authenticity of something. The signs that followed the apostles confirmed the word that was spoken by them. Why was this necessary? This is very simple.

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<sup>98</sup> E.g. John Macarthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 100-103.

<sup>99</sup> In the past form. It means the moment already happened.

<sup>100</sup> David Reagan, “Gifts of the Spirit - Are They for Today?” in <http://www.learnthebible.org/gifts-of-the-spirit-are-they-for-today.html> (Accessed June 24, 2010).

They were preaching something that had never been heard before. They were preaching that the Messiah had come. But, instead of setting up His kingdom on earth, he died on the cross and arose from the grave in order to offer to all men eternal life.<sup>101</sup>

Considering the function of the signs in this passage, we may remember the story of Moses when God sent him to Israel to let them know the message of deliverance. God gave him three signs to convince the Jews that the word Moses spoke was really from God (Exodus 4:1-9). This is the first use of miraculous signs in the Bible and this passage shows us their original intent. Signs are used to authenticate the spoken word. They verify that the message spoken by a man is indeed from God. To deal with the Jews (to whom Moses went out) or the world in the first century (to whom the apostolic community went out), God uses the miraculous signs to distinguish himself.

So, what is the meaning this promise for the church today? I would like to compare the position of the believers in first century A.D. and today. There is a significant difference between the apostolic community and us today. The apostolic community had only the Old Testament as their Bible, but we have both the Old and New Testaments as our Bible. For the apostolic community, they needed more signs to confirm their message when they preached about Jesus. The Old Testament prophesies the coming of Jesus and it talks about the event in future tenses. However, the apostolic community needs something to confirm their proclamation in present form

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<sup>101</sup> David Reagan, "Gifts of the Spirit - Are They for Today?"

and they could not find it in their Bibles. The miraculous signs help them in confirming their proclamations.

Today, churches have the Bible as the “miraculous” sign through which they proclaim the good news. The presence of supernatural things is not a must in their message. The Bible is enough to confirm the proclamation of churches today. Using theological terms, the supernatural revelation was closed when the canon of bible was closed. The section below, “Have Miracles Ceased Today?” will help us get a fuller explanation.

Although signs accompany the believers, it does not mean the promises of immunity are an imperative for believers today. Remember, Mark 16:17-18 does belong in the Scripture, and it does not contain any imperatives. It does not say, “Go out and handle snakes.” This passage is describing something that will occur, not commanding that something should occur. These events, “they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” may be occurring today, but there is no guarantee it will always occur in every situation and condition. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that it will not occur today. In today’s church, God has reason (and sovereignty) to make them occur or not.

### **Have Miracles Ceased Today?**

The definitions above may cause some people to wonder about the continuation of miracles in the present day. The explanations above may raise questions in people’s

minds about the relevancy of miracles today. Does the Lord still perform miracles today? If yes, why, then, are miracles so rare?

First of all, I would like to clarify my position before answering this question. We have to differentiate between miraculous gifts and miracles themselves. What I mean by miraculous gifts are the gift of prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues. Granting those gifts to some people are miraculous, but their continuation must be examined carefully.

Generally, some Reformed scholars believe that these gifts have ceased after the time of the apostles or since the canon of special revelation was closed.<sup>102</sup> For them, the main purpose of miraculous gifts was to provide evidence for the word of God. Since the canon of the Bible is closed, logically, these gifts are no longer needed. The Bible itself is enough to confirm that the Bible is the Word of God.

I believe the canon of the Bible is closed. We do not need further revelations, evidence, tools, or even gifts to confirm that the Bible is the final and ultimate Word of God. However, though the canon has closed, it does not mean that all gifts have ceased.

The Lord grants gifts, including miraculous gifts, to his church to equip his church in ministry. However, we have to be cautious in the openness with which we exercise

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<sup>102</sup> See, e.g., B. B. Warfield, *Miracles: Yesterday and Today* (1918; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) and Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979).

these miraculous gifts today.<sup>103</sup> If I were to label my position on the continuation of miracle, I will label it as semi-continuous.

So, are there still miracles today? First, given that those gifts are miraculous and that they are semi-continuous, it does not make sense that all miracles have ceased. There is no compelling reason for the disappearance of all signs at this time. Secondly, we have also seen that God is the perpetrator behind miracles and his power does not change, so miracles can still happen today if he wills. Thirdly, the Bible has asserted that miracles always have goals that focus on the glory of God and not for personal propaganda.

God still does miracles today, but there is no man who has the right to claim that he has permanent miraculous powers or that he is a miracle worker.

The next question is if the miracles still continue today, why are miracles so rare?

John Frame has a satisfying answer for this question:

Miracles are rare today because God has no sufficient reason to make them frequent. Since Jesus has accomplished redemption once for all, the next great manifestation of divine power will be seen at his return. Until then, there is no comparable reason why we should expect God to bless us with more spectacular displays of his power than were seen, for example, in the four hundred years between Joseph and Moses.<sup>104</sup>

Actually, miracles did not occur continuously during the Old and New Testaments (the amount of time people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt [approximately 400 years] is the same with the amount of time between the two testaments). In both

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<sup>103</sup> I hold the same position with Robert L. Saücy, "Open but Cautious." To get a fuller explanation of this position, see Robert L. Saücy, "Open but Cautious" in *Are Miraculous Gift for Today: Four Views*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994),

<sup>104</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 264.

testaments, we find “there is a pattern in Scripture, in which the extraordinary serves as the preparation for the ordinary.”<sup>105</sup> Spectacular experiences are followed by usual routines. The miracles were often found in the time of Jesus because they functioned as a sign for Jesus. Using the arguments from Reformed scholars, currently, the Bible itself is enough to give us evidence and signs about who Jesus is. If the mission of Jesus is already accomplished in this world, what reason does God have to perform miracles as often as he did during Jesus’ time? Miracles seem to rarely happen because God has no reason to make them happen often. Also, we cannot claim that miracles are rare today because we do not have complete data about miracles.

### **Conclusion**

Firstly, the Gospel states that miracles are intended to show who Jesus is. The four Gospels have different purposes in the telling of miracle stories. They have their own emphases in portraying Jesus to their audience. It is shown through the way they “choose” the miracle stories to include in their gospels, the way they compose the stories and the way they integrate the stories with other parts of their gospel.

Secondly, the miracle stories are not intended to confirm to Jesus’ followers that they have to be miracle workers like Jesus. Though we have some passages of the Gospel that seemingly support it, it does not mean that we should be miracle workers. The apostles and the believers in the early church did perform miracles in their ministry. However, the canon of the Bible is closed. Signs of miracles for believers are not a must-

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<sup>105</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 264.

have. Instead, the miracle stories demand every believer to give the proper responses to the true miracle worker, Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, are miracles possible today? Of course they are possible. Miracles are possible because the world is under God's sovereign control. John Frame said, "It is God who, by his nature and decrees, determines what is possible. The regularities of nature are his covenantal gift to us, and they do not at all limit his ability to work in the world as he pleases."<sup>106</sup>

Lastly, we have to consider the nature of each Gospel as we preach the miracle stories. We have to pay attention to the background of the Gospel and sit in the seat of the author and its recipients. If we preach the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, we should wear the glasses of the writer and reader of each Gospel. Every Gospel has its own emphasis in recording the miracle stories. The miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand has different meanings according to different writers and readers. Consequently, the meaning of these stories may differ also for today's audience.

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<sup>106</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 267.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will explore literature to analyze what present-day theorists say about preaching miracle stories of the Gospels. First, I will survey what literature have taught concerning preaching, interpreting miracle texts and preaching miracle texts, as well as explore contemporary views of miracles and how Christianity responds to them. I will start with literature on preaching and try to answer this question, "What do contemporary homiletics say about preaching, especially biblical preaching?" Then, I will continue with the works of the New Testament scholars on the topic of miracle stories. In this section, the biblical studies on miracle texts will be surveyed. Also, the context in which these miracles occurred will be examined to understand how context is one of the important factors in interpreting these texts. One question I would like to answer is "How can we best communicate the gospel to this generation through miracle stories?"

From the homiletics literature, I will survey the works on homiletics which contain chapters on preaching the miracle stories. Some of the works give general principles to preach miracle stories and others provide more specific help. Because preaching is used as a bridge between two worlds, preachers need to know about the world around them, not just the biblical world. Literature that studies the miracle stories from the view of the extra-biblical and secular world will also be presented in this chapter. I will also present the literature on how Christian theologians respond to

the challenges from non-Christians who argue against Christianity concerning this topic. The combination from both sides will help preachers to teach miracle stories relevantly without oversimplifying them.

Lastly, I will summarize interviews that I conducted with five local pastors concerning their preaching of miracle stories of the gospels. These pastors serve in congregations which have a strong Chinese background. I have asked them about how they prepare their weekly sermon, especially sermons that come from miracle texts. Their rich experiences in the pastoral ministry will be a great contribution in composing the manual on how to preach the miracle stories of the Gospel.

## **Survey of Literature on Preaching and Miracle Stories**

### **Survey of Literature on Preaching**

Everyone who talks about preaching should refer to books like *John Stott's Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today*, that speak about the general nature of preaching. Stott says, "A true sermon bridges the gulf between the biblical and the modern worlds, and must be equally earthed in both. All preachers are aware of the painful tension between ideals and reality."<sup>1</sup> He explains the nature of the bridge by saying:

It is because preaching is not exposition only but communication, not just the exegesis of a text but the conveying of a God-given message to living people who

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 10.

need to hear it, that I am going to develop a different metaphor to illustrate the essential nature of preaching. It is non-biblical in the sense that it is not explicitly used in Scripture, but I hope to show that what it lays upon us is a fundamentally biblical task. The metaphor is that of bridge-building.<sup>2</sup>

From this starting point, all preachers must have the conviction that preaching should be based on the Bible, the Word of God. This conviction about preaching will enable the preacher to preach with authority. Al Mohler states, "The authority of the preacher is intrinsically rooted in the authority of the Bible as the church's Book and the unblemished Word of God."<sup>3</sup> Sidney Greidanus confirms and explains in detail this first task:

The only proper authority for preaching is divine authority – the authority of God's heralds, his ambassadors, his agents. Heralds and ambassadors, we have seen, do not speak their own but that of their sender. Contemporary preachers, similarly if they wish to speak with divine authority, must speak not their own word but that of their Sender.<sup>4</sup>

To determine whether a sermon is biblical or not, Robinson provides this question as a litmus test for the present-day preacher: "Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?"<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Robinson continues, the passage of the text should govern

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 137.

<sup>3</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "A Theology of Preaching" in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duda (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 12. Consistent with his high-commitment that the Bible is the Word of God, he states that preachers should follow the genre of the text in shaping the sermon form. Indeed, he gives excellent explanations in every part of genre on this topic but does not use the step-by-step approach in his homiletical textbook like Haddon W. Robinson or Donald R. Sunukjian do.

<sup>5</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 22.

the sermon.<sup>6</sup> Like other speakers, preachers as the speakers of God communicate a concept and they build the concept based on the text of the Bible. Their concept is derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context.<sup>7</sup> In his book, *Biblical Preaching*, Robinson offers a step-by-step approach to developing biblical preaching in ten stages. He is well-known for developing a case and method for communicating the big idea of biblical texts.<sup>8</sup>

In the same tones with Robinson, Don Sunukjian asserts that the preacher's task is two-fold: "to present the true and exact meaning of the biblical text in a manner that is relevant to the contemporary listener."<sup>9</sup> He explains that 'to present the true and exact meaning of the biblical text' means that the sermon should unfold according to biblical author's natural flow of thought.<sup>10</sup>

However, based on Stott's thesis, sermons must also be relevant. Haddon

Robinson summarizes the need for contemporary relevance:

In the final analysis, effective application does not rely on techniques. It is more a stance than a method. Life-changing preaching does not talk to the people about the Bible. Instead, it talks to the people about themselves—their questions, hurts, fears, and struggles—from the Bible. When we approach the sermon with that philosophy, flint strikes steel. The flint of someone's problem

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed explanation of the big idea in preaching, see Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson, ed., *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 10.

strikes the steel of the Word of God, and a spark emerges that can set that person on fire for God.<sup>11</sup>

Preachers should take this second task of setting their listeners on fire for God seriously. Their sermon will be effective if it is able to be both biblically accurate and contemporarily relevant.

Calvin Miller provides a brief guide in his book about how to understand and analyze audiences.<sup>12</sup> Chapter Two of his book, "Who's Out There? Exegeting Audience" will help preachers to get a good picture of modern audience and several approaches on how to reach them through preaching. Miller admits that the hardest exegesis he does is the work of analyzing the audience. He quotes George Bernanos, "If only God would open my eyes and unseal my ears so that I might behold the face of my parish." He comments that "The country priest understood that you can only talk at people till you know who's before you and then you can talk to them: until we understand who's listening, we are powerless to really speak."<sup>13</sup>

Miller suggests four questions to get to know the audience well: (1) Who's out there? (2) What do they believe?, (3) What do they know about God?, and (4) How can we help audiences come to terms with who they are? After that, preachers also need to pay attention to three questions about their sermon: (1) What does our audience not want?, (2) What does our audience want?, and (3) What do sermons need to talk about?

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<sup>11</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, "Blending Bible Content and Life Application" in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Marshall Shelley (Portland: Multnomah, 199), 65.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Preaching*, 252.

For specific studies and approaches to postmodern audience, it is good to consult the work of David W. Henderson<sup>14</sup> and Graham L. Johnston.<sup>15</sup> In his book, Henderson tries to prove the thesis “great communication is relevant communication” in postmodern audience context. What does it mean to be relevant? Does it mean something is relevant when it has to do with the audience’s circumstances, when it has bearing upon their questions and struggles? Henderson explains:

For something to be relevant to me, two things need to be true. First, whatever it is – a talk, a book, a letter, an introduction guide – needs to be pertinent to my life. It has to address the issues I’m wrestling with, answer the questions I’m asking, meet my needs.

But that is not enough. Something is not relevant for me unless I see and understand its pertinence. Unless I can make the connection, unless I see how this book or conversation connects with my life, it really isn’t helpful; it isn’t relevant at all.<sup>16</sup>

The Bible is the Word of God, and because of that, the Bible is relevant to all ages. Relevant communication of the Bible comes down to two things: Biblical authority and audience sensitivity. We need to allow the Bible, in its entirety, to provide the direction and substance of our messages. Only in this way will our words have *actual relevance*, speaking to the longings and desires of the human hearts. Also, at the same time, we need to speak in such a way that the Bible’s message is brought to bear on the needs and circumstances of our listeners in a language they understand. We need to

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<sup>14</sup> David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God’s Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Graham M. Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Henderson, *Culture Shift*, 24.

begin with where they are, with things that are familiar and meaningful to them. That will ensure that our listeners will be able to see the *functional relevance* of the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

In an effort to be relevant, preachers need to know who their audience is. It is not enough for preachers to know that they are Christians who come to the church every Sunday, who listen to God's word and be done with it. We have to know who they are. Who are they within their environment? Who are they when going to the supermarket, the mall, the electronic store, etc? Who are they when outside of the church and not inside? How they think has a strong connection with how they live. Henderson identifies three kinds of audiences today (part 2-4): they are consumers, spectators, and self-absorbed individuals. He describes who they are and how God's Word can reach them.

After we identify our audience, we also need to know how they think. Henderson states that postmodern people think in three 'beyonds' (part 5-7): beyond God, beyond right and wrong, and beyond meaning and purpose. After knowing the three 'beyonds' preachers should think how God's Word could reach this generation. In each these chapters, Henderson provides awesome insight of how to reach out to 'beyond' people who believe God is absent from their lives, and draw them into Christianity.

God's Word is relevant for all time, including today. It holds answers that this world longs for. Henderson says, "When we use the Bible to preach, teach, or share faith, we connect heaven and earth. God speaks, and we bridge the gap between time

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<sup>17</sup> Henderson, *Culture Shift*, 34.

and eternity.”<sup>18</sup> To accomplish this mission, preachers have to know their world well and represent God clearly.

Graham McPherson Johnston presents the same struggles in his book. His purpose in writing his book “is to examine both sermon development and delivery in light of our postmodern generation.”<sup>19</sup> Knowing this generation will affect the way preachers deliver the ancient truth to a contemporary audience. Regarding the urgency of this task, Johnston says,

The postmodern mindset is not exclusive to the unchurched. It’s shared by those folks who fill church sanctuaries each Sunday. This cultural gap must be bridged, within the church and outside it, so that the Christian worldview engages the listener’s worldview in a life-altering encounter . . . . Today, then, preachers must think not only on the message but also on the nature of the hearers. Our times beg the question, ‘Is the message of Christ being heard, not just preached?’<sup>20</sup>

He includes ten characteristics as the hallmarks of postmodern culture:

1. They react to modernity and all its tenets.
2. They reject objective truth.
3. They are skeptical and suspicious of authority.
4. They are like missing persons in search of a self and identity.
5. They have blurred morality and are into whatever is expedient.
6. They continue to search for the transcendent.
7. They are living in a media world unlike any other.
8. They will engage in the knowing smirk.
9. They are on a quest for community.
10. They live in a very material world.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Henderson, *Culture Shift*, 221.

<sup>19</sup> Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 26.

The core of postmodern thinking is a refusal of absolute and objective truth, combined with the embrace of radical self. Postmodernism is the "tolerance" from and to all things and all people.

Johnston emphasizes the importance of knowing our audience if we want to communicate effectively. The audience is not going to stay tuned-in to the preachers unless they see that the message relates to their lives. The preacher needs to spend time analyzing the needs of the listener so that he can reach them effectively.

Considering the characteristics above, preachers may be tempted to compromise the truth. For Johnston, however, truth and doctrine must not be compromised, but must be made into the initial and primary markers for attracting hearers instead. One will find that not many are interested. The postmodern generation values what they experience (sense) over what they know or reason (sensibility). Here, Johnston provides four postmodern beliefs concerning rational thought:

1. People can manipulate rationality to suit their purposes.
2. People want life to make sense. Absurdity is all right in small doses, but nobody wants to live in it.
3. Postmodern listeners still use reason to understand their world but not exclusively; their experiences and cultural context slant their perceptions of life. Reason alone is not enough.
4. Living in a multi-cultural society full of complexity, people in the twenty-first century have become accustomed to a world of ambiguity. The people in our society have built up a tolerance for living with contradictions.<sup>22</sup>

Engaging such audiences will necessitate new approaches in sermonic delivery, and the final chapter addresses this concern.<sup>23</sup> Preachers need a new approach in

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<sup>22</sup> Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 149-72.

delivery that can be learned from the communicator. The day of preachers has been replaced by the day of communicators. And these communicators will engage their audiences in new ways, but with the same ancient message. Dialog must be accepted and a more inductive approach to preaching must be used. Lectures should be replaced by "telling" and proclaim the coming of age narrative. Sermons themselves should be interspersed with a variety of media, drama and visual elements. Remember, we are preaching to the community with cultural images. Although there are some who disagree, images must receive equal attention as the exposition. In short, sermonic-effective communication in the postmodern world must be relevant, concise, polished, inductive, varied, stimulating, and direct application associated with the listener's life struggles. And, if it is wrapped up in humor to boot, one is assured of large numbers of listeners each week.

Similarly, preachers need to reconsider the sermon structure. The modern deductive approach that presents the truth at the beginning of the message may no longer be as effective as before. In the postmodern world, where there is no agreed upon truth, preachers need to consider the inductive approach. This approach does not reveal the truth until the end of the message. This structure provides an explanation, facts and stories from the beginning of the message. The audience is called upon to participate in the process of finding the truth. This is effective because the element of coercion can be minimized. They draw conclusions from the message for themselves.

However, the relevancy side of sermon must be shown in the sermon structure.

Don Sunukjian describes three relevancy-structured patterns in structuring sermons.<sup>24</sup>

The first pattern is relevancy at the end. This pattern develops the biblical passage in its entirety, then draws out the contemporary connections of the single Take Home Truth to various groups in the audience or to the various situations that they face.

Introduction  
I. Passage  
II. Relevancy  
Conclusion<sup>25</sup>

The second pattern is relevancy interspersed. This pattern unfolds one segment of the biblical passage and shows the contemporary connection. Preachers unfold another segment of the biblical passage, then carry forward the contemporary connections in a similar manner.

Introduction  
I. A. Passage  
    B. Relevancy  
II. A. Passage  
    B. Relevancy  
Conclusion

The third pattern is relevancy wrapped. This pattern probes at length the contemporary connection of the first passage unit, even though the listeners are still unaware of the passage. Using this pattern, the preacher demonstrates in the first main point that the same situation exists in the biblical world. In the same manner, the

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<sup>24</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 161-81.

<sup>25</sup> Or it can be like this: Introduction  
I. Passage Explanation  
II. Passage Explanation  
Conclusion – Relevancy

second main point is unfolded, first in terms of the text and then in terms of the contemporary application. Below is the pattern:

- Introduction – contemporary (here is what is going on in our lives)
- I. Passage problem (the same thing was going on in the biblical world)
- II. Passage solution (here is how they dealt with it)
- Conclusion – contemporary (we are going to deal with it the same way)

All these patterns can be combined with the deductive and inductive approach.

However, I prefer the inductive approach to combine with these patterns because of the narrative genre of miracle stories and the nature of our postmodern audience.

Haddon Robinson says, “Strong biblical sermons must be bifocal.” They reflect both the idea and the development of the text, and they also reflect the concerns and questions of the listener. It is only through relevant, biblical preaching that men and women can come to understand and experience what the eternal God has to say to them today.”<sup>26</sup>

#### Survey of Literature on the Interpretation of Miracle Stories of the Gospels

Graham H. Twelftree’s book *Jesus the Miracle Worker*<sup>27</sup> should be mentioned in interpreting miracle stories of the Gospels historically and theologically. He is very attracted to the high percentage of space given in the canonical gospels to the miracles. This is in contrast to some modern scholars that discount the reality of miracles at all, or at least label the miracle stories with legendary or mythological status. Twelftree says

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<sup>26</sup> Haddon Robinson, “My Theory of Homiletics” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, gen. ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 58-59.

<sup>27</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999).

that scholars from Schleiermacher to Sanders to Guthrie downplay the significance of miracles to a point, sometimes even ignoring them entirely. Philosophers like Hume have difficulty accepting the reality of miraculous events. Scientists have had major methodological concerns with miracles, and even theologians like Bultmann, Tillich, and Macquarrie have significant objections to the idea of a miracle, at least as they are commonly understood.

Interestingly enough, however, Twelftree does not discuss how to respond to the problems of modern scholars, but immediately begins his presentation with a question: "How did each Gospel writer understand the miracles of Jesus?" This way enables us to begin with the Gospels as they stand.<sup>28</sup>

In this book, Twelftree has four primary objectives: to examine how the canonical gospels portray and understand the miracles; to attempt to determine how Jesus himself understood the miracles; to examine the historicity of the miracle events in the gospels; and finally, to see how these three examinations reflect back on the historical Jesus quest. These objectives are achieved by examining how each writer composes their Gospel. Twelftree found that each author's methods of composing the miracle stories in each of their Gospel is far from uniform. Twelftree highlights some of the differences, including how the secondary nature of miracles being behind the teachings of Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, especially in Matthew, contrasts with John, where the primacy of miracles is more significant. They become messages in-and-of themselves, apart from the direct teachings.

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<sup>28</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 22-23.

However, according Twelftree, there are some patterns that emerge. For example, miracles in Matthew neither create faith nor do away with doubt. Miracles in Matthew seem to be more useful in defining the relationship between the people and Jesus. In Luke and John, miracles are ambiguous in terms of power, purpose and results. But most importantly, all the Gospels seem to unite in describing a miracle because it is not an ordinary work of a prophet. All events point to the power of God working through Jesus. The Gospel writers use miracles to create equality between Jesus and God's identity and making miracles a media of eschatological and soteriological work, too.

One of the miracles that is not easy to interpret and apply is the story of Jesus raising the dead. In the story of the widow of Nain's son, Twelftree gives examples about how to interpret and apply this story:

Luke gives the story pathos by saying that the dead man was "only" a child (a saying he uses three times, Lk. 7:12; 8:42; 9:38) and that the mother was a widow (7:12). In turn, Jesus' miracle working is motivated by pity or compassion (7:13), further evidenced in Luke's saying Jesus "gave him to his mother," a phrase straight from the story of Elijah (Lk. 7:15/1 Kings 17:23 LXX), the implications of which we are about to note.

The response to the miracle come on the keynote of this pair of stories, as Fitzmyer put it, which is sounded in Luke 7:16: "Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!'" On many occasions Luke casts Jesus in the role of a prophet. Although, as here, Jesus rejects that role when it is related to social reformation, he tolerates the title in relation to his miracle.

. . . Further ahead in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' death is referred to as being "taken up" (Luke 9:51) in the same way Elijah is portrayed as being taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:11) and also expected to return. Thus, by aligning this story to that of Elijah in his miracle Jesus is already being portrayed as the one who will be taken up by God to return again.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 154.

He sees clearly the connection between Jesus in the New Testament and Elijah in the Old Testament. How Israel responded to Elijah in the Old Testament is the same response, but even greater, that they should have to Jesus.

In part two, Twelftree explains how each Gospel writer understands Jesus' miracles and, especially for Luke and the fourth Gospel, makes extensive discussions of issues in them. I feel that Matthew and Mark also have issues regarding the miracles in them. For example, why is it that only Mark and Matthew have the story of feeding the four thousand while the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand is found in all the Gospels?

If Twelftree explores the miracles of Jesus according to the authors of the Gospels, Simon Kistemaker tries to integrate the miracles stories of Jesus by dividing it into categories: the "nature miracles," "sick made well," "ears to hear," "demons expelled," "raised from the dead," "eyesight restored," "lepers cleansed," "lame walk again," and "miracle and Jesus." This division, at least, helps the readers of his book to get integrative scenes from the view of different authors of the Gospels.

Kistemaker structures all the chapters by offering his observation and providing comments and rich insights on a miracle event. Each chapter ends with "Points to Ponder," where the author provides several insights on the text and what they mean to the modern believers. As a result, the book can be a good example for preachers about how to apply miracle stories to their audiences. It helps preachers be a good bridge between the two worlds.

Kistemaker's effort to integrate the stories is shown when he observes stories that are recorded by two or more writers. For example, he notes that when Jesus expels the demon from someone at a synagogue, Mark and Luke record different demon responses after Jesus' rebuke.<sup>30</sup> Kistemaker does not focus on the difference but to the authority that Jesus has over the demon, "There is no power in heaven and on earth that is able to resist Jesus' authority."<sup>31</sup> It is consistent with his statement that the purpose of miracle stories is "... to show that he was the Messiah."<sup>32</sup>

On another occasion, Kistemaker points out that the miracle of the withering fig tree is the only miracle that Jesus performs with "no immediate beneficial effect on the disciples. Yet this miracle had a redeeming effect when seven weeks later on the day of Pentecost these disciples preached the gospel and three thousand people were penitent, cut to the heart, and believed in Jesus."<sup>33</sup> Such insights make his book an enjoyable read.

I prefer that preachers should consider the different emphases of the Gospel authors. Integration is not false, but we should highlight the special characteristics of each Gospel. However, overall, this book can be used as a basis of comparison for preachers, if they are careful not to use it as the place to consult, in their exegetical and

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<sup>30</sup> See on Chapter 2, sub-chapters Mark and Luke.

<sup>31</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Miracles: Exploring the Mystery of Jesus's Divine Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 120.

<sup>32</sup> Kistemaker, *The Miracles*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Kistemaker, *The Miracles*, 44.

homiletical tasks. Preachers can compare their interpretation of the miracle texts with the implication of the text for modern readers of this book.

Reading and using the books of Twelftree and Kistemaker are not complete without consulting the work of Wendy Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*.<sup>34</sup> The miracle events in the Gospels cannot be separated from the context in which they occurred. Though a Catholic scholar, it is useful for the study of miracle texts, especially for the background and context.

This book contains four parts and two appendixes. Cotter begins this book in Part 1, "Gods and heroes who heal," which contains stories and texts about deities and heroes most commonly associated with healing. Cotter includes some raising-of-the-dead stories, for they are attached to the same gods and heroes who heal in this part.

Part 2, "Exorcists and exorcisms", contains the story of exorcisms in antiquity – including stories from Philostratus's life of Apollonius of Tyana, Tobit, Josephus and the Genesis Apocryphon – as well as a series of texts which review various ideas about the nature and identity of demons and the assumed cosmology of the exorcism stories in the Greco-Roman world. The importance of the existence of demons and exorcism events for Cotter is that, "Only when we see that a Christian narrator has taken pains to include some of these distinctive features in a Jesus exorcism story may we conclude that the meaning of the exorcism as well as its implications for the role of Jesus is meant to be situated against the unusual cosmological expectation of apocalypticism."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Wendy Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the Study of New Testament Miracle Stories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 106.

Part 3, "Gods and heroes who control nature", presents stories of gods and heroes who, like Jesus, control nature (chapter 6) through the wind and sea: Orpheus, Pythagorus, Empedocles, Apollonius of Tyana, Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar and by walking on or over water, as Poseidon and the Jewish God are claimed to do. Also in Chapter 7, gods and heroes who control nature by changing water into wine – "a miracle that is connected with one god, Dionysus"<sup>36</sup> – or by multiplying food, "a miracle that belongs to the God of the Jews."<sup>37</sup>

Part 4, "Magic and Miracles" considers the miracle events that are performed by magicians through their manipulation promises. This data is found in a set of texts from Pliny, Plutarch and Seneca. Cotter says, "The purpose of this chapter is to recognize that certain elements found in the Jesus miracles invite associations with magic."<sup>38</sup>

Cotter offers solid data and research on the miracle concept and events in extra-biblical times. Indeed, Cotter did not write an exposition to show Jesus' superiority over other gods and heroes, but her comparison over the similar stories will help us to see the uniqueness of Jesus' miracle among others. For example, in chapter "Daimons/Demons in Apocalyptic and Christian Sources," she presents gods and heroes of the ancient Greek and biblical heroes who did the exorcisms. In Mark 1:21-28, "the demon's cry to Jesus in v. 4, "What have you to do with us?," or literally, "What

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<sup>36</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 132.

<sup>37</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 175.

between you and me?," is too odd to be claimed for ordinary Greco-Roman parlance."<sup>39</sup>

This statement is not found on ancient Greco-Roman gods or heroes and other biblical characters in "similar" stories. Implicitly, in her comparison, we see the supremacy of Christ over the demonic world and the Jews believe "... the messianic age will bring destruction to the demonic world."<sup>40</sup> The demon's cry confirmed that Jesus is the promised Messiah. In our exegetical investigation, we have to at least answer what the difference is between Jesus and other gods and heroes who have "similar" stories.

What Cotter has done will contribute in exegeting the gospel texts to find the meaning and implication of the miracle stories.

In their work, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*,<sup>41</sup> James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek complement the work of Cotter in understanding miracle stories. They wrote this book because "... most people have little awareness of the oral and literary forms used for communicating in the present environment, it's not surprising that entering seminarians often know little or nothing about the specific literary forms that were used on the first-century world."<sup>42</sup> Consequently, though the seminarians and pastors "become aware of certain New Testament forms, they still might have difficulty

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<sup>39</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 120.

<sup>40</sup> Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 120.

<sup>41</sup> James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Bailey and Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*, 11-12.

in understanding how knowledge of a specific form is helpful in the interpretive process."<sup>43</sup>

One of the New Testament forms explained in this book is the miracle story. They define the miracle story as "any narrative that contains a description of a miraculous event." From this definition, they divide this form into 6 sub-forms: (1) an exorcism, (2) a controversial story containing a miracle, (3) a story of healing in response to a petitioner, (4) a provision story, (5) a rescue story, and (6) an epiphany.<sup>44</sup>

The next step after identifying the sub-forms is analysis of miracle stories with three investigation questions: (1) What characters are included in the story and how do they interact?, (2) Where does the dramatic stress occur in the story, and what difference does it make?, and (3) What role does the miracle itself play in the story?<sup>45</sup>

They demonstrate their method on the story from Mark 3:1-6:

This story contains three characters: Jesus as the teacher and healer, the sick person, and the opponents. Though introduced directly after Jesus appears in the synagogue, the sick person plays only a minor role in the story. . . the story gives us sustained attention to Jesus' interaction with his opponents.

The main scene describes Jesus' strong reaction to his opponents' malevolence and his bold healing of the man's hand on center stage. The final scene, for the audience, brings the opponent's dark intentions out into the light as it reveals their plans to destroy Jesus. By this development, the meaning of the story comes into sharper focus: Jesus' healing constitutes the good and the saving of life he was asking about, whereas the opponents' plan reveals not only their failure to become convinced by Jesus' miracle but also their ironic contravention of the sabbath in their scheming to do that which was evil. In Markan context, the story offers another illustration of the truth of Jesus' pivotal

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<sup>43</sup> Bailey and Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Bailey and Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*, 137-9.

<sup>45</sup> Bailey and Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*, 139.

declaration in 2:27-28: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."<sup>46</sup>

Based on their method, we understand that the meaning of the story does not come from Jesus' interaction with the "client" but also from people who were present in that event.

#### Survey of Literature on the Preaching of the Gospel and Miracle Stories

In his book, *New Testament Exposition*, Walter Liefeld places the miracle stories in the chapter "Preaching from Difficult Text."<sup>47</sup> Why difficult? He points out that there are two difficulties in preaching miracle stories: first, preachers may misunderstand the purpose for which Jesus performed the miracles and for their continuance in the book of Acts, and second, because of the spiritual significance that we attach to the miracles today. We get an impression that the purpose of miracles is to point to the divine Sonship of Christ. But Jesus performed miracles for other reasons as well. For example, the Gospels make it clear that Jesus' miracles of healing and feeding of the five thousand were acts of compassion. His miracles were also expressions of the power of the kingdom. Therefore preachers must be sure that both they and their congregation understand the purpose for which the particular miracles under consideration were performed.

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<sup>46</sup> Bailey and Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*, 140-1.

<sup>47</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 140-2.

The second difficulty that miracle stories entail lies in the tendency of many preachers to “allegorize” or “spiritualize” the miracles. Liefeld gives warnings that every preacher should pay careful attention to preaching the miracle texts. He uses Mark 4:35-41 as an example. He says that the point of the story is to focus attention on the supernatural power of Jesus and ultimately on the question of his identity. Concentrating on a supposedly spiritual application to the storms of our lives could result in a reduction of the powerful Christological message it contains.

While Liefeld places preaching miracle texts in the section entitled “Preaching Difficult Texts,” Donald Hamilton places it in the section “Our Homiletical Treasury.”<sup>48</sup> This chapter contains four sections. Hamilton begins with some consideration about miracles and continues with biblical terms for miracles and their purpose in Scripture. The last part is the ultimate part regarding how to preach miracle passages.

According to Hamilton, in preaching miracle stories, preachers must describe the text, explain it, and apply it. Hamilton describes his method briefly:

He must first tell what happened, using both the text and context. Then, he must tell what this meant to the original participants, observers, and readers. Finally, he must tell what this miracle means today. What practical difference should it make in the lives of his hearers?

To do this, the preacher must catch a “feel” for the actual event. He should put himself, so to speak, into that situation and try to imagine what it was like both from the perspective of the recipient of the miracle (if there was a recipient) as well as from the perspective of those who witnessed the event.

Then, the preacher should examine the text thoroughly to determine the purpose of the actual event what response, if any, was intended by doing of the miracle? What actually took place? How should this be paralleled as we

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<sup>48</sup> Donald L. Hamilton, *Homiletical Handbook* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 176-80.

“observe” the same miracle today? The goal of the sermon should correspond to these things.<sup>49</sup>

How about the form or the structure? Hamilton suggests some methods. The first method is the Analytical method. He uses the model from Merrill Tenney in John 9 as the example:

- I. The case
- II. The cure
- III. The confession
- IV. The consequences<sup>50</sup>

If the text is very brief, he suggests the Keyword method: “structure it around a keyword like lessons or truth. A longer-than-usual introduction could tell the story, and the body of the sermon could major on application.”<sup>51</sup>

The next method is Syllogistic method when the purpose of the miracle seems to be evident. Hamilton uses the Lazarus story as an example:

- I. The giving of life is a divine right or prerogative.
- II. Jesus openly restored Lazarus life.
- III. Therefore, Jesus demonstrated a divine prerogative.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hamilton, *Homiletical Handbook*, 178.

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton, *Homiletical Handbook*, 178.

<sup>51</sup> Hamilton, *Homiletical Handbook*, 179.

<sup>52</sup> Hamilton, *Homiletical Handbook*, 179.

Last but not the least, Hamilton offers the Narrative approach. He suggests that passages like John 5:1-15, Mark 2:1-12 or Mark 5:21-43 have great possibilities for being developed as either first-person or third-person story sermons.

There is one huge question in my mind regarding his methods: "Do all miracle passages use only one method in preaching it?" For example, all miracle passages can use the Keyword method, though some passages are not brief. The same is true about the narrative approaches. All miracle passages are written in narrative form, are they not?

If Liefeld places attention on the difficulties of interpreting the text, William R. Eichhorst focuses on the nature and apologetic value of the Gospel miracles.<sup>53</sup> According to Eichhorst, the first problem that should be addressed is the historical evidence for Gospel miracles. He said, "those who question the validity of miracles must also deny the accuracy of the record. Van Til, making reference to Barth, demonstrates how the denial of miracles relates to the denial of history."<sup>54</sup> Accepting that the biblical record is reliable must be the starting point.

The next step in studying the Gospel miracles is to identify some arguments against Christianity. Wendy Cotter above and Kenneth Woodward below state that in every religion, even in paganism, we find miracles resembling the ones found in Christianity. The question that should be asked then is, "Do the accounts of miracles in

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<sup>53</sup> William R. Eichhorst, "The Gospel Miracle: Their Nature and Apologetic Value," *Grace Theological Journal* 9/31 (Fall 1968): 12-23.

<sup>54</sup> Eichhorst, "The Gospel Miracle," 13.

the New Testament and the pagan miracle stories resemble one another so closely that there is not only analogy of form but also a real dependence?"<sup>55</sup>

For Eichhorst, we have to understand Gospel miracles in view of the person of Christ. Observing Luke 4:14, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" and further, "All the people were amazed and said to each other, 'What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!'" (Luke 4:36). Clearly Jesus' miracles signal the interference of supernatural power with an environment governed by natural law. We also see that the Gospel authors show that Jesus does not perform a single punitive miracle. Thus, when the disciples wished to call fire from heaven upon Jesus' enemies, Jesus rebukes them and says, "For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56; NASB). It is not unlikely that even John the Baptist expected punitive miracles. His question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt 11:3), may well have been asked because he expected Jesus to baptize also "with fire" (Matt 3:11-12). Thus the true nature of the Gospel miracles must be seen in relation to the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Their source, their purpose and their impact are found in Him. They are distinguished from the pagan miracles because they go beyond the realm of magic and must be explained in relation to the character and doctrines of Christ.<sup>56</sup> This is also a response to other arguments that miracles are considered as psychosomatics,

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<sup>55</sup> Eichhorst, "The Gospel Miracle," 14.

<sup>56</sup> Eichhorst, "The Gospel Miracle," 17-22.

or a transgression of the laws of nature, or a higher natural law, which at present is unknown to us.

The apologetic value can be found when miracles are a revelation of Christ's glory. He states that a study of the Gospel miracles reveals how well they do manifest the glory of Christ and all miracles relate to His offices of Messiah, Prophet and Priest.<sup>57</sup> For Eichhorst, miracles should be seen from a Christ-centered perspective.

Eichhorst states that the contribution of this article is implicitly for preaching. His thesis begins with the nature of the Bible as the Word of God or supernatural revelation of God. Miracles are a part of the whole supernatural revelation. As the revelation of God, the miracles function as a powerful stimulation to faith in Christ. In the context of sermon relevancy, this question should be asked by preachers: "What should my audience's response be after reading the story of Jesus' miracles?"

David H. Johnson divides miracle stories into two hermeneutical types. One type is a narrative that can be treated as such in preaching. The narrative has its own plot and characters. The second type is a story with parabolic intention. In this kind, the miracle is a symbol of some larger spiritual reality. This is most apparent in the fourth Gospel.<sup>58</sup>

What are the structure and form of miracle stories like? Johnson quotes Gerd Theissen, who states that the structure of miracle stories has four parts: the introduction, the exposition, the story of the miracle itself, and the conclusion. Johnson

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<sup>57</sup> Eichhorst, "The Gospel Miracle," 20.

<sup>58</sup> David H. Johnson, "Preaching the Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels," *Trinity Theological Journal* 18:1 (Spring 1997) 85.

says that variations to the regular pattern are needed to unlock part of the meaning of a miracle story. Moreover, this form will not work in some instances, for example in Matthew 8:5-13, where the story of the miracle itself comes last. He suggests a more simple form. He begins with the characters. The characters in a miracle story always include the protagonist (Jesus) and the victim(s).<sup>59</sup> He does not specify a particular form, but lets the characters shape the form of the story themselves.

In interpreting miracle stories, Johnson said that each miracle story focuses more attention on the miracle-worker and the significance of the miracle rather than on the miracle itself or on those who benefit from the miracle. They tell the story of who Jesus is and what his mission is. From this starting point, he suggests three theological keys to miracle stories: Christology, eschatology, and views of sickness and disease in the ancient world.<sup>60</sup>

However, preaching miracle stories still has three problems that should be addressed. The first problem is related to historical skepticism. Due to some enlightenment models and Bultmanian views regarding miracles as being impossible, he suggests bracketing out the issue of skepticism and faith in a sentence or two in order to help preachers sketch a biblical worldview. The second problem is related to other aspects of historical skepticism. The problem faced is based on the question, "If Jesus healed back then, or controlled violent storms, why does he not do the same today?" The third problem is that preachers are so fascinated by the historical miracle itself that

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<sup>59</sup> Johnson, "Preaching the Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels," 86-87.

<sup>60</sup> Johnson, "Preaching the Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels," 88-91.

they miss the intent of the narrative. Miracle stories are written with a minimum amount of details and do not always tell us everything we would like to know. The focus of the sermon should be on the story, not on the miraculous event.<sup>61</sup>

Some consideration and “warning” in preaching miracle texts can also be found in the work of Eric C. Rust.<sup>62</sup> He considers three issues that arise from many fronts in preaching the miracle stories of the Gospels. From the biblical side, we must face the results of the contemporary study of the Gospels. From the scientific side, we must consider the newer attitude to “scientific law” and its implications for the nature of miracles. From the theological point of view, we must see what a “miraculous event” means, since it and religious faith are correlative.

Last but not least, we have to consider the work of David L. Larsen.<sup>63</sup> He addresses four issues in preaching miracle text: exegetical, apologetical, pastoral, and structural. What is interesting in his work is that the last two issues are not found in other works above. On pastoral issues, there is a struggle to answer, “Are miracle stories normative for the Christian church today?” Larsen does not agree with Warfield and the cessationists, who “go beyond what demonstrates in their contention that there have been no bona fide miracles of healing since the first century. This limits

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<sup>61</sup> Johnson, “Preaching the Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels,” 91-95.

<sup>62</sup> Eric C. Rust, “Preaching from the Miracle Stories of the Gospels,” in *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor's Treasury*, ed. James W. Cox (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 231-46.

<sup>63</sup> David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995). By including how to compose miracle stories in his work, implicitly, he classifies the form for miracle story as narrative form.

God.”<sup>64</sup> But he also says that the contemporary preachers of prosperity theology have done the same thing. They go far beyond what Scripture describes. This is why Warfield’s approach, though extreme in its outcome, is salutary. Preachers know how difficult it is to help those who suddenly become convinced that God will heal them, and when He does not, there is often much wreckage of faith strewn over the landscape.<sup>65</sup> This is a serious pastoral problem arising from preaching the miracle-stories of Jesus. Biblical preachers need biblical wisdom to face the issues of our times head-on with scriptural and sane discourse.<sup>66</sup>

On the structural issues, Larsen says that we face some structural challenges. Since the sermon on the miracle-stories fits so neatly into a problem-solution type outline, we must beware of a kind of predictable sameness.<sup>67</sup> He uses Mark 8:22-26 as the example. We cannot always follow this problem-solution pattern because some passages have

... evidential and pedagogical value in [their] story. Giving physical sight to the blind man is seen as suggestive concerning the need of the disciples of Jesus for spiritual sight. In Mark 8:18 Jesus asks, ‘Do you have eyes but fail to see?’ and underscores the dimness of their spiritual perception. After the healing of the blind man, Jesus gives an eye examination to the disciples, including Peter. Peter sees and confesses that Jesus is the Christ, but he is not clear in his perception of the necessity of the Cross (Mark 8:32-33).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 169.

<sup>65</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 169.

<sup>66</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 169.

<sup>67</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 171.

<sup>68</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 171-172.

Ultimately, Larsen sees that the focal point of miracle text is Jesus. He says, "We need to seize these great texts as vivid demonstrations of Christ's power to change even the most hopeless cases."<sup>69</sup> It means the sermon on the paralytic lowered by four friends into the presence of Jesus (Luke 5:17-26) should not really focus on the consecrated couch carriers but on the clearly basic issues of the forgiveness of sins (v. 20) and the authority of Jesus (v. 24). The feeding of the 5,000 should not concentrate on the little boy's lunch or baskets left over but on Jesus (John 6:1-14). An outline he has used is:

I. Jesus feels for people.

II. Jesus feeds people

III. Jesus fills people.<sup>70</sup>

Preachers need to focus consistently on the person of the Lord Jesus.

#### Survey of Literatures on the Contemporary Views on Miracle and Christian Responses

Most Christians may think that the miracle stories are only found in their Scripture. In fact, miracle stories can be found in other religions. Ken Woodward's book may be the only book in this decade that discusses the meaning of miracle stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism.<sup>71</sup> The studies on the miracle stories in other religions will help preachers, especially in Indonesia, to get their

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<sup>69</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 172.

<sup>70</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 172-3.

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, *The Book of Miracles: The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam* (New York: Touchstone, 2001)39-97.

message across to the audience. The pluralism context and culture is a must-face situation for every church in Indonesia.

Woodward divides his book into three parts: miracles in Monotheistic Religions, in Indian Religion,<sup>72</sup> and in contemporary modern time. Part 1 deals with monotheistic religions. He begins this part with an introduction to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that surveys their respective founders and sacred texts. After this brief survey, Woodward walks the reader through the miracle stories of the Hebrew Bible, noting how they tend to decrease as the story progresses. In the Jewish section, he found miracle stories associated with Jewish sages, saints, and spiritual masters.<sup>73</sup> The section on Christianity traces the miracle stories of the Gospels (especially Mark), the Acts of the Apostles, and Christian saints from antiquity to Francis of Assisi.<sup>74</sup> The same pattern applies for Islam, as Woodward includes miracles associated with Muhammad and a number of Sufi saints.<sup>75</sup>

Woodward offers a guide to miracles as they unfold within the sacred scripture of each tradition and are amplified in the sacred biographies of the saints, sages, and spiritual masters. His aim is to show how these stories function within each tradition and what they reveal about those who perform them.<sup>76</sup> Simply, Woodward's thesis is if we want to understand the teaching or doctrine of a religion, we have to know the

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<sup>72</sup> I prefer call it Polytheistic Religion.

<sup>73</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 39-97.

<sup>74</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 98-172.

<sup>75</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 173-232.

<sup>76</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 19.

miracle stories, their workers and scripture well and properly. If we ignore "miracles," we lose all.

For Woodward, the best way to understand the miracle stories of religions is to begin with stories (as all religions do) and we will find that miracles tend to define themselves.<sup>77</sup> His subject is not the literal veracity of miracles but their meaning within the traditions of the world's five major religions. "Miracles have the character of signs and wonders," he writes. "As wonders, miracles are always astonishing, but as signs they are never wholly inexplicable."<sup>78</sup>

Though Woodward states "in some ways, all religions *are* the same,"<sup>79</sup> what he writes helps his readers, especially for me as a Christian and preacher, to get a fuller understanding about the place of miracles in non-Christian faith. To know the understanding of other religions of miracles will help the preacher to get across to his audience and show the uniqueness of the Christian faith and the superiority of Christ as the miracle worker.

In order to hold his statement: "All religions are the same,"<sup>80</sup> Woodward recounts Buddha's enlightenment as the supreme experience, but excluded the resurrection of Jesus, as the "equal" supreme experience. However, I am glad because in his "inconsistency", he shows the superiority of Christ above the others. As a Christian and a preacher, I most disagree with his treatment of Christianity among other

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<sup>77</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 23.

<sup>78</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 323.

<sup>79</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> Woodward, *The Book of Miracles*, 20.

religions. However, I, personally, appreciate his effort in holding the reader's interest, spinning a good yarn, and simplifying a complicated theme. He has given me many invaluable insights about other religions.

However, the challenges for Christianity do not come only from other religions that also have miracle stories in their scripture. They come from skepticism, atheism and different worldviews that go against Christianity. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas edited *In Defense of Miracles* to answer these challenges.<sup>81</sup>

We should admit that one of the problems on the debate of this topic is the definition of miracle. Anyone can speak about the miracles, but they will carry different meanings. Based on his study and investigation of the bible, Richard Purtill defines miracle as "an event (1) brought about by the power of God that is (2) a temporary (3) exception (4) to the ordinary course of nature (5) for the purpose of showing that God has acted in history."<sup>82</sup>

Other religions and worldviews may disagree with this definition. The atheism-naturalism and pantheism worldviews may be considered as the main oppositions who disagree with Purtill in recent years. However, according to Ronald Nash, "Within the current cultural climate, it is the worldview of *naturalism* that creates the greatest problems for belief in miracles."<sup>83</sup> This is true especially in the West where science

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<sup>81</sup> R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, ed., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1997), .

<sup>82</sup> Richard Purtill, "Defining Miracles" in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1997), 72.

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Nash, "Miracles and Conceptual Systems" in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1997), 116. He defines naturalism as a belief system that can be analogue as a sealed box. In a closed

develops the fastest. As Nash observes: "But in Europe and the United States, the competing worldview that Christians encounter most frequently is metaphysical naturalism . . . . Nothing exists outside the material, mechanical (that is, non-purposeful), natural order."<sup>84</sup>

David Clark narrows down the argument and considers evidence for the occurrence of specific miracles within Christianity. He begins this part by exploring the relationship between the concept of a miracle and various religions. He argues that many religions do not have adequate conceptual space for a miracle and that Christianity has superior evidence for its miracle claims compared to other religions, especially in the case of the resurrection of Jesus. He develops criteria for comparing the relative strength of competing miracle claims within alternative religious perspectives, even when they have room conceptually for miracle.<sup>85</sup> The result is that Christianity, with its miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, occupies a superior position among other religion's traditions. In comparing Jesus and other "miracle workers," Clark responds convincingly to the charge that Jesus was merely a magician. Clark shows that there are significant differences between Jesus' miracles and the supposed miracles of other "magicians." For example, while magicians usually used objects in their work, combined with incantations and spells, Jesus simply spoke,

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system, which is believed to the naturalist, the miracle is something that is not possible because there is no agent that can cause an exception or to intervene against the natural laws that exist in this universe (Ronald Nash, "Miracles and Conceptual Systems," 121).

<sup>84</sup> Nash, "Miracles and Conceptual Systems," 119.

<sup>85</sup> David K. Clark, "Miracles in the World Religions" in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1997), 209-12.

commanding demons and diseases on the basis of His own authority.<sup>86</sup>

The last but not the least, one work that should be mentioned on miracles is C. S. Lewis' well-known book *Miracles*. In his work, Lewis discusses in detail the probability of miracles. He shows the tension between *naturalism* and *supernaturalism*.

Naturalism presents nature as a closed system with everything being explained by natural cause and effect, whereas supernaturalism presents nature as an open system, operating by natural law most of the time, but open to intervention by God. They are not hostile, but complementary.

He starts out his book by defining what is meant by the terms Natural and Supernatural. This, he states, is the starting point since a miracle is defined as the Supernatural interfering with the Natural. Naturalism is a worldview that *a priori* rejects supernaturalism, especially miracles. The main reason is supernaturalism contradicts with a purely naturalistic view. Supernaturalism, the naturalist claims, cannot be accepted by logic and reason of the mind. According to Lewis, it is false because the act of thinking logically is a product of supernaturalism. It cannot be explained by naturalism as demanded.

In defense of the probability of supernaturalism, he says that naturalism had a tendency to self-destruct. He begins his argument by explaining the nature of naturalism. For naturalism to be true means everything must be accounted under its premise or system. The main objection to naturalism is its inconsistency. Naturalism uses logic and reason to establish its existence, but self-contradictorily, tries to account

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<sup>86</sup> Clark, "Miracles in the World Religions," 207-8.

for logic and reason under a naturalistic system. In other words, if naturalism were true, then we could not be certain of the arguments that attempt to establish it. For Lewis, naturalism does not respect logic and reason but actually undermines it. If naturalism provides explanations for everything in the universe but undermines the logic and reason used to establish it, then it would either disprove the theory or make it very unlikely. If naturalism undermines reason itself, "it would have destroyed its own credentials. It would be an argument which proved that no argument was sound—a proof that there are no such things as proofs—which is nonsense."<sup>87</sup>

Though he divides miracles into categories, miracles of the old and new creation, for Lewis the grand miracle is the incarnation. He writes,

The central miracle asserted by Christians is the incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares the way for this, or results from this. Just as every natural event is the manifestation at the particular place and moment of Nature's total character, so every particular Christian miracle manifests at a particular place and moment the character and significance of the Incarnation.<sup>88</sup>

He prefers to say that Jesus "entered the universe, instead of he came down from heaven"<sup>89</sup> to describe the incarnation event and support the possibility of supernaturalism.

### **A Review of Interview with Local Pastors**

The interviews for the local pastors are conducted for three purposes: 1. to get

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<sup>87</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracle: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 22.

<sup>88</sup> Lewis, *Miracle*, 173.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis, *Miracle*, 126.

information about the concept of local congregations on miracles; 2. to get a description of how pastors prepare the miracle text for their sermon; and 3. to get input in writing a manual/book that can help them in sermon preparation.

Due to the purpose of this thesis-project which is for the Chinese-Indonesian context, the local pastors interviewed come from this background. Historically, their churches began with Chinese immigrants from China or from a mission to reach non-Christian Chinese people in Indonesia. Until today, Chinese-Christians still observe some tradition and practices from their historical background. These still influence many aspects of their lives, including their church lives. They still keep the traditions and practices that do not contradict with their Christian faith.

Rev. Sia Kok Sin

(Senior Pastor of *Gereja Kristus Tuhan Hosana* in Surabaya)

Rev. Sia<sup>90</sup> says that his congregation generally believes in miracles, although they may not have experienced remarkable miracles in their lives. Interestingly, it seems they do not want to raise their hopes up when they experience miracles in their lives.

Based on his personal interest and pastoral experience, his favorite miracle story is when Jesus feeds 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fishes. To get the main message of this story, he uses the paradigmatic interpretation of C.H. Wright who wrote extensively about the ethics of the Old Testament. For the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people, for him the truth is that Jesus cares about and help us in our needs; and

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<sup>90</sup> Sia Kok Sin, interview by author, Surabaya, Jawa Timur, July 27, 2010.

the application is that we have many different kinds of needs but the most important thing is to remember is that Jesus cares and will help us in all our needs (not only our need for food). So, in the application, this story provides hope for church members who are experiencing economic struggles. It seems that economic factors must be taken into account in showing the relevance of this story.

Sia gets help in determining his sermon relevance by knowing the needs of the community through personal conversations, counseling and visitations. He draws attention to the role of pastoral visitation in his church. The Chinese-Indonesians are very pleased to be visited by the pastor as a form of attention and love. It is not enough to just pray for them, but we, as pastors, have to help them in concrete ways, or involve the church board to extend help. Generally they appreciate pastors or ministers who want to visit them.

The significance of the relevance and application can be seen in the steps that Pastor Sia takes while making a sermon. He begins with the text. It is important for him to understand the essence and outline of the story. After he studies the text, he finds the form of the miracle that is disclosed, for example, he tries to know what kind of miracle this is: healing, exorcism, nature, etc. The message he gets will be placed within the framework of the concept of miracles and the omnipotence of God's concern for humans and believers in the struggles of their lives. As the last step, he applies it paradigmatically and not literally, following C.H. Wright.

When I asked him about the idea in a sermon, he prefers a single-idea sermon. He did not give theological or rhetorical reasons, but situational reason. He prefers a

single idea sermon because the audience of today finds it hard to remember many things as an effect of the current television culture that replaced the reading culture.

Sia said the biggest challenge he encounters in his church in preaching the miracle stories is that the congregation feels that the stories are real stories of Jesus' day, but do not have relevancy for their time, although they believe that miracles of God are still going on today. That is why he tends to avoid a simplistic and literal application, but places it within the framework of God's omnipotence and concern for human life. This is what he will say if someday he meets a young pastor who asks him some tips in preaching miracle stories.

Rev. Nathanael Channing

(Senior pastor of *Gereja Kristen Indonesia Sulung* in Surabaya)

Rev. Channing<sup>91</sup> finds that his congregation tends to see miracles and providence of God as the same things. Miracles are generally understood by his congregation as the providence of God every day, from waking in the morning to sleeping at night, these are miracles from God. Though they believe that there are spectacular miracles and, while they happen to some people, it does not affect other people who have not experienced such miracles. They trust on the providence of God every day, in their work and ministry and these are also regarded as miracles from God.

Channing has a similar concept of miracles with that of his congregation. His concept can be seen clearly in how he understands the meaning of his favorite miracle

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<sup>91</sup> Nathanael Channing, interview by author, Surabaya, Jawa Timur, July 30, 2010.

story, Jesus changes water into wine. This story shows God's providence to every person who is in a predicament. In this story, we see God's providence that was right on time and that He pays attention even to small matters. It should be noted that God cannot be ruled by human desires because He is sovereign over time and work. But His providence will bring peace and joy.

Channing most dislikes the story of Jesus raising Lazarus and other similar stories. He reasons that contemporary people usually ask why people can not be resurrected like that of Jesus' times. It also leads to their next question, Is God's sovereignty different in ancient times from today? He also finds among his people some perceptions that what happened in the past will not happen in today's times. He finds it difficult to preach this text most especially in applying it to people who are grieving.

Channing always starts from the context of the text. He studies the context and the text to get its meaning or main message. After that, he builds the bridge to see the connection between ancient time and contemporary time. He applies the message from the text to his context by using the proper application that fits with ancient context.

One of his strategies to connect with his congregation is to find the proper illustration. For him, illustrations effectively channel the main message to the congregation. Theological concepts that make headlines in the text must be translated into practical life - the reality of church life. The events in church, society or daily lives really help him find accurate illustrations. Thus the message of God's Word will come down to earth and be applied in concrete ways.

Channing sees a close relationship with the congregation as the key to sermon relevancy. He tries to build relationship to congregation from all socio-economic levels, not only to certain levels. He applies it to all members of the congregation, from the poorest to the richest. A good relationship will create open communication. They will talk openly and honestly with him so that he can see their problem clearly. They will readily talk about the realities of their lives, rather than in slapstick or veiled languages that make them seem fine.

Channing also identifies some problems he meets in his congregation. He mentions economic pressures in the top group. This causes people to live in uncertainty and worry. This is the main cause of corruption that exists in all levels of society in Indonesia. This problem leads to more problems in Indonesia such as a high-crimes rate, acts of violence, and extortion in many places. Other problems are associated with family matters like bad communication between husband and wife which leads to infidelity. Because they only think of making money and their children's education, they have no time for family.

In preaching miracle stories, he gives three warnings: (1) Do not bring the congregation into an area that is not realistic. Do not let religion be like opium to fulfill fake needs; (2) Be careful to answer the person who has urgent needs and wants a quick response; and (3) Do not get stuck on the impatience of the church members who await the Lord's help. Their impatience can lead them to the wrong understanding of miracles as fairy tales in the past when nothing happens in their waiting time.

As the longest-serving pastor among the pastors interviewed, Channing's

pastoral experience was very noticeable in how he prepares a sermon. He always tries to build sermons that connect with his congregation. So, when I ask him what suggestion he will give if he gets a chance to give advice to his junior in preaching miracle texts, he will encourage them to establish an intimate communication with members of the congregation and to know the congregation's problems. Preaching must touch the real needs of the congregation.

However, this does not mean that Channing will forget the text that should be the basis of his sermon. The miracle sermon must explain the meaning of miracles with the right concept and context. Preachers must begin with the text. After that, the sermon must answer the needs of the congregation because miracles should not only equip the cognitive and affective domains. Preachers should bring the explanation of the omnipotence and sovereignty of God to His people in present time.

Rev. Djusianto Sutedjo

(Pastor of *Gereja Kristen Indonesia Residen Sudirman* in Surabaya)

If Rev. Channing perceives the story of Jesus raising the dead as the most difficult story to preach, Rev. Sutedjo<sup>92</sup> really likes the stories of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter and healing a woman who is sick from bleeding (Luke 8:40-56). In this passage we see that Jesus heals a woman who experienced bleeding for 12 years and also heals (raises) the daughter of the chief of the synagogue. The lesson of this story is that Jesus heals all kinds of people from various walks of life, including from a religious group (Jairus's

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<sup>92</sup> Djusianto Sutedjo, interview by author, Surabaya, Jawa Timur, August 11, 2010.

daughter), as well as from the ordinary classes of people (women who are sick of bleeding). Both of them have incredible faith in Jesus.

The story that Sutedjo dislikes the most is the one of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-22. It is difficult because he finds in another part of the Gospel of Mark 11:12-14 stating that the tree is not bearing fruit in season. He explains that the purpose of the story is to show that Jesus has power over the universe, including the fig tree and teaches us to believe sincerely in the Lord Jesus.

Like other pastors, Sutedjo begins composing sermons with the text: studying the background and paying attention to the relationship of the text, to what precedes and follows it. Then, he focuses on the word study and seeks the meaning of the words. After completing the text study, he crystallizes it into a main message for ancient times. Lastly, he makes the application for today.

In making the application, he perceives this to be the most difficult part. According to him, "It's hard to apply miracle stories." The problem is how to connect the occurrence of miracle that is so rare today with the miracle that occurred so often in Jesus' time. When he preaches Jesus as a miracle worker, he finds it hard to synchronize what the bible says with the reality of life. The hardest thing to do is to give a reflection on it and pray for the sick, but there is no miracle and the sick is still in the same condition.

Sutedjo prefers to focus on a single main message and develop sub-themes that refer back to the main message. For him, the main message is more obvious if there is only one and if it is sharpened with sub-themes (points), though not too many. The sub-

themes should always reflect back to the main message. If there are too many sub-themes (points), it will be difficult for the congregation to get the main message.

To be relevant in his ministry, Sutedjo tries to interact with his congregation, mainly through pastoral visitations. He says that pastors have to pay attention to the environment around them (society), and take note of any trends happening at this time (e.g. suicide). Pastors can also read the newspapers, or browse the Internet to find out the current events.

There are three things I have learned in this interview process: first, the biggest challenge in preaching miracle stories is to show the relevance of ancient miracle stories for today. It is not easy to answer the question why God does not raise the dead today. Generally, Christians often hold certain paradigms such as what happened in the past must happen again today. If it does not, then the event is not relevant at all. Therefore, when preachers preach miracle stories, they are challenging the congregation to change their paradigms.

Second, pastoral ministry is one of the best means for preachers to be down-to-earth. Sometimes, listeners do not buy the message because it seems to contradict some areas in their life. Pastoral ministry helps preachers to know their listeners better. The sharing of experiences with the pastors has enriched me to know the kind of struggles that the members of the congregation face in this world. Knowing what the members' struggles are will help the preachers to better relate with their listeners.

Third, pastors need to upgrade their exegetical skills after their first seminary education. I think there must be a continuing training or education for the pastors to

improve themselves in areas such as preaching according to the various genres of the bible. It will help them to have enough skills in interpreting the bible accurately.

Rev. Soetjipto Notonegoro

(Pastor of *Gereja Kristen Kalam Kudus Kupang Jaya* in Surabaya)

The concept of miracles to Rev. Notonegoro<sup>93</sup> is that “miracles can still happen, but do not put hope in miracles.” For him, miracle does not always occur in our lives. He believes it is a biblical concept and he also finds his congregation shares the same biblical concept.

Talking about miracle stories, the first story that comes to mind is the miracle of the five loaves of bread and two fish. According to him, the five loaves and two fish brought by the boy shows what we have. When we bring it to the Lord, He will use it for the glory of His name and as a blessing to many people.

This is how he makes a sermon: (1) Read the passage. (2) Reflect on questions related to the story and questions that may occur in the church. (3) Read commentaries, gather specific information related to the socio-cultural context, the term/word. (4) Summarize the main message and its relevance for today's congregation. (5) Arrange the outline, complete with illustrations and supporting materials. He agrees that every sermon should have a single message only. He says that it was taught when he was in seminary.

To connect with his congregation, he organized a small group, like a focus group.

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<sup>93</sup> Soetjipto Notonegoro, interview by author, Surabaya, Jawa Timur, August 12, 2010.

This group helps him to get information from the congregation regarding the messages preached. He also believes that illustration is very important in a sermon. Illustrations in a sermon will help congregations understand more easily.

However, according to Notonegoro, the most important things in preaching miracle text are to deliver the sermon as clearly as possible, to not reduce the faith / hope of the congregation, but to help them to keep on believing / hoping in God, not in the miracle.

If there were a book on how to preach miracle stories, he wishes the author of the book to put the main message of each miracle story in the book.

Rev. Hendry Ongkowidjojo

(Pastor of Indonesia *Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia Andhika* in Surabaya)

Rev. Ongkowidjojo<sup>94</sup> believes that miracles are a sign of God's power and that Jesus is the Son of God. It becomes his practice to check his congregation's understanding on the miracles. This biblical concept can be seen in how he interprets the miracle stories.

Regarding the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, Ongkowidjojo says that the meaning of the story is to show that God is the Creator, and Jesus really is God, who can create something out of nothing. It shows how different He is in doing miracles in a way that He does not just perform wonderful things. Moreover, in this story, the Lord performs a lot of testing and involves his disciples. From this, we learn that we need to

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<sup>94</sup> Hendry Ongkowidjojo, interview by author, Surabaya, Jawa Timur, August 16, 2010.

be more submissive to Him, especially in facing the challenges of life and ministry, because God understands us and there are many problems we do not know the way out of, but the Lord knows what to do.

In preparing his sermons on the miracle texts, Ongkowidjojo begins with finding the immediate context of the miracle story, as other pastors do. Next, he compares his text with the parallel records found in the other Gospels. After he compares the Gospels to understand the uniqueness of his text, he focuses on his text to discover what the Gospel writers wanted to convey through the miracle records. He ends by looking for the implication of the text for his audience today. However, above all, his major thesis on preaching miracles is that everyone who preaches miracle stories of the Gospels must understand enough of the characteristics of each of the Gospels, and the nature of the miracle stories. Nobody should dare to preach before they have that knowledge.

To make his message down-to-earth, Ongkowidjojo perceives that a good relationship with the congregation is a must. He will get nothing if he does not know them at all. However, it is not enough to simply have good relationships. As a pastor, he must be sensitive to his congregation's various needs and struggles. This will help him make his sermon relevant. Also, illustrations help him get his message across and especially aid in explaining difficult concepts.

There are three things I have learned in this interview process: first, the biggest challenge in preaching miracle stories is to show the relevance of ancient miracle stories for today. It is not easy to answer the question why God does not raise the dead today.

Generally, Christians often hold certain paradigms such as what happened in the past must happen again today. If it does not, then the event is not relevant at all. Therefore, when preachers preach miracle stories, they are challenging the congregation to change their paradigms.

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## CHAPTER 4

### PROJECT DESIGN

The following manual is designed for pastors to use in sermon preparation or seminary students working on their homiletic study. The goal of the manual, and of this project, is to introduce them to a step-by-step process in preparing and delivering sermons based on miracle stories from the Gospel. This manual is composed using materials from biblical, hermeneutical and homiletical studies as well as the responses and insights garnered from interviewing local pastors in Indonesia. Their feedback helps me understand the difficulties in preparing sermons based on miracle texts from the bible and this manual will propose solutions to help them through those difficulties.

Every preacher or homiletics student who is familiar with 'big idea preaching' will most likely notice the influence that Haddon W. Robinson work's *Biblical Preaching*<sup>1</sup> as the main contribution in this manual. Apart from his work, there are also other works in biblical and homiletical studies added to this manual. Although it is slightly different in the steps of preparing the sermon, in fact, *Biblical Preaching* could be thought of as the soul of this manual.

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<sup>1</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001)

## **What's Wrong with Preaching Miracle Stories?**

When I was still a fresh seminary graduate, I remember listening to one sermon from a guest preacher who was invited to preach in my first church assignment. He preached about how Jesus calmed the storm. He had good hermeneutical skills in the exposition of the context and the content of the text. He demonstrated his Greek language skills. He also explained the meaning of the disciples' question, "Who is this man?" in what I thought was a good theological analysis.

Then he discussed the relevance of the story for today's contemporary audience. He looked at the congregation (and to me) and said, "All of us have a storm in our lives. Like the disciples, we panic when we experience a storm. If you own a business, you panic when your income is running low. If you are a parent, you panic when your children question your decision. If you are a student, you panic when you have only one chance to pass the course. However, if you have Jesus in your vessel, you don't need to worry. He will calm your storm. He who calmed the storm in the Lake of Galilee is the same One who will calm your storm. He is the Lord of the disciples and also your Lord. Trust him. He will help you through the storm."

As he spoke these words, I looked at my bible carefully. A question forming in my mind: "Does this text give Christians the promise that Jesus will calm their spiritual storm?" I couldn't find it. As a fresh seminary graduate, I had hermeneutical questions in my mind. However, the biggest question in my mind was "What is the meaning of this story for the contemporary audience?"

Perhaps as preachers or seminary students, you will also come across difficulties in interpreting and preaching the miracle stories of the Gospel. Not only in applying the text to your audience's circumstances, but also in interpreting the stories accurately. You may have questions in your mind like, "Why do Mark and Luke's recording of the exorcism story have some differences in them? What do they mean?" Further, some preachers choose to spiritualize the meaning of the story or use other ways to help them in applying the message. However, the main question for all preachers is still the same: "Are we able to get the original meaning of the text and apply it in the proper way?"

### There is Something About Preaching Miracle Stories

There are three reasons why preachers should take the preaching of miracle stories seriously. First, miracles had a dominant place in our Lord's ministry. Straton said that "miracles stories occupy such a large place in the gospel narratives that to omit them in preaching is to leave out an essential part of the gospel message and to overlook a rich source of sermonic material".<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we should give as much attention to the miracle stories as what we give to the narratives of the Old Testament or Paul's letters.

Second, other religions have miracle stories in their scripture and traditions too. And the Bible shows us that miracles also exist in other religions. When Aaron's staff was turned into a snake, the magicians of Egypt were able to perform a similar feat. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Hillyer Hawthorne Straton, *Preaching the Miracles of Jesus* (New York: Abingdon-Cokebury, 1950), 7.

New Testament, Paul also met a craftsman who can do miraculous things. Thus, miracles exist not only in Christianity, but also in other religions. Ken Woodward<sup>3</sup> wrote a book about the existence of miracles in the mainstream religions, which includes Christianity. He tried to be as objective as possible in his investigation so as to present the founders and religious figures of the different religions on the same level. If he is right, then there is nothing special in Christ's miracles because we can also find the same thing in other religions. The challenge for the Christian preacher is to clarify what separates Christ from the miracle workers in other religions.

Third, Walter Liefeld said that the difficulty in preaching miracle stories is the tendency of many preachers to "allegorize" or "spiritualize" the miracles.<sup>4</sup> What Liefeld wants to say is that incorrect handling of miracle stories will make one lose the real meaning. Imagine a situation where an improper interpretation method is applied to these texts when preparing for a sermon. The resulting sermon will carry the inaccurate message, which the congregation will then apply to their daily lives. That is why we need a proper and accurate method to interpret and handle miracle stories, so that our Sunday sermons contain accurate and responsible messages.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, *The Book of Miracles: The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam* (New York: Touchstone, 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 141.

## Textual, Topical or Expository Sermon

Sermons used to be divided into three distinct categories: textual, topical and expository. Usually this old distinction is based on the length of the text to be preached. If you preach one or two verses only, that is textual sermon. If you preach two or three passages from different books, that is topical sermon. If you preach one passage only, that is expository.

Personally, I prefer to divide it, as Greidanus did, into two categories: Biblical or Non-biblical Sermon. I start my position in defining expository preaching. Mostly contemporary evangelical homiletics teachers agree that expository preaching is more a philosophy than a method.<sup>5</sup> It's about our commitment to preach the bible as the word of God. Haddon Robinson defines expository preaching as "the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies it to the hearers."<sup>6</sup>

I think preachers who believe the Bible is the word of God should agree with this definition. If we agree with this definition, it means we agree to say that expository preaching is biblical preaching and this is the only kind of preaching that should be preached by preachers of God all over the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 22. Look also Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 10-16 and Richard Mayhue, "Rediscovering Expository Preaching" in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. Richard Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas (Dallas: Word, 1992), 3-18.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 21.

It's not easy for preachers to leave the old distinction. However, it's not wise to force all preachers to accept this definition if they do not understand the soul of expository preaching. I agree with Don Sunukjian that this old distinction is not always helpful. We have to "define true biblical preaching by *how* the biblical material is treated – that is, faithful to the meaning and flow of the original author and relevant to the contemporary listener. Any of the above approaches – textual, topical, and expository – can be a biblical message."<sup>7</sup> As Robinson said, the soul of biblical (expository) preaching can be seen in this test, "Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?" If you have commitment to bend your thought to the Scriptures, you are making the expository sermon though you still hold to the old distinction of sermons.

### Using This Manual

John Stott says: "A true sermon bridges the gulf between the biblical and the modern worlds, and must be equally earthed in both. All preachers are aware of the painful tension between ideals and reality."<sup>8</sup> In making the miracle story sermon, the preacher must begin with the biblical world. After completing the task of looking at the biblical world, you will move on to looking at the (post)modern world. You will learn how to compose a sermon that can get the point across to the modern audience.

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<sup>7</sup> Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 13.

<sup>8</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 10.

## Rules of the Game

When we are playing a game, there is something that we should do first. We must know and agree to follow all the rules of the game. If we use our own rules, then the intent and purpose of the game will not be achieved. Our only choices are to obey or refuse to obey. To obey means we qualify for the play and the goal of the game will be attained. Just like playing sports, preaching the miracle stories of the Gospel involves knowing and obeying rules. If we refuse to obey the rules, then the purpose of the miracle stories cannot be accomplished.

### 1. A Sermon Must be Based on the Bible or it's Not a Sermon At All

Dependence of a preacher on the Bible as the Word of God is something that is not negotiable. Sidney Greidanus gives a description of the importance of the Bible in the task of a preacher in conveying the word of God:

If preachers preach their own word, the congregation may listen politely but has every right to disregard the sermon as just another person's opinion. If contemporary preachers preach with authority, however, the congregation can no longer dismiss their sermons as merely personal opinions but must respond to them as authoritative messages. The only proper authority for preaching is divine authority – the authority of God's heralds, his ambassadors, his agents. Heralds and ambassadors, we have seen, do not speak their own but that of their sender. Contemporary preachers, similarly if they wish to speak with divine authority, must speak not their own word but that of their Sender. . . the Scriptures alone have divine authority. If preachers wish to preach with divine authority, they must submit themselves, their thoughts and opinions, to the Scriptures . . .<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 12.

This means that a sermon is a sermon because the word of God is its main foundation, and therefore it has divine authority. Without the word of God in it, a sermon is not a sermon at all.

The commitment to subject our thoughts to the Scripture is *sine qua non* in our preaching. It is the only test factor that determines on whose behalf we preach.

Haddon Robinson admits that the man in the pulpit faces the pressing temptation to deliver some message other than that of the Scriptures—a political system (either right-wing or left-wing), a theory of economics, a new religious philosophy, old religious slogans, a trend in psychology.<sup>10</sup> “Yet when a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer with a word from God but only with another word from men. God is not in it.”<sup>11</sup> Based on the above, the miracle story sermon should be based on an accurate interpretation of scripture or it is not a sermon at all.

2. Although the Bible is fully inspired by God, the Bible is written in a particular context.

Although the full Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, it does not mean that the Bible is derived directly from Heaven. God has chosen some people - the apostles and His prophets - to write His word and these people lived here on earth. The authors of the Bible are inspired by God to write these words in the context in which they lived. The background of the writer and reader, language and even how an author put a

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 20.

passage in his writing is a matter that must be studied carefully by modern readers or we will get an inaccurate meaning of the text. As Fee and Stuart said, “a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, to understand the meaning of the word of God that were given to them, readers who live in the present must understand the context in which they need to accept the word of God. Without context, a text is a pretext. It only has a meaning if it is read in the proper context. The context determines the meaning of the text.

We have to admit that this is not an easy task. We must recognize the eternal relevance of the Bible, but the Bible also has unique historical characteristics that must be taken into account. “But because God chose to speak his Word through human words in history, every book in the Bible also has historical particularity; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written. Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the “tension” that exists between its eternal relevance and its historical particularity.”<sup>13</sup>

This concept also applies to understanding the miracle stories in the Gospel. Although they wrote about the same story, each Gospel writer also have their own purpose in writing them. Matthew had a special purpose when he wrote the story of Jesus healing the lepers even though Mark and Luke also recorded a similar story. When reading Matthew’s writings, we must take into account his very strong Jewish

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 21.

background. This will allow us to understand the portrait of Jesus that Matthew wanted to present to his readers.

### 3. We Must Read the Miracle Stories Based On the Genre of the Gospel

Besides having a commitment to the Bible and its context, every preacher should also show a similar commitment to the literary types of the text or the genre. Leland Ryken shows the significance of the genre:

Each Literary genre has its distinctive features. Each has its own "rules" or procedures. This, in turn, affects how we read and interpret a work of literature. As readers we need to come to a given text with the right expectation. If we do, we will see more than we otherwise would, and we will avoid misreading. If we know that stories are built around a central conflict leading to final resolution, we are in a position to see something that the writer has built into the story. . . . An awareness of genre will program our reading of a work, giving it a familiar shape and arranging the details into an identifiable pattern. Knowing how a genre works will spare us from misinterpretations.<sup>14</sup>

To understand the miracle story, we have to know its literary genre and obey its rules of the game. Following Greidanus' classification,<sup>15</sup> we find that the miracle story is a form that can be classified into the Gospel genre. The Gospels, in which Jesus' miracle stories are recorded has many forms in it and the miracle story is one of them. Therefore, when we read the Bible, particularly the miracle stories, we must read it in the perspective of the Gospel genre.

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<sup>14</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 25.

#### 4. The Gospels Did Not Record Everything about Jesus

The four Gospels record the story of Jesus, especially during his ministry on earth. These gospels did provide information to readers about the person and work of Jesus Christ, but that does not mean they record everything about Jesus while He was on earth. If everything about Jesus is recorded, as then the apostle John says, "... the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25). But if the Gospel writers select materials that will be written in their writings, the selection was not purposeless. John said, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, who are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31)."

#### 5. Each Gospels Has Its Own Portrait of Jesus

As we know, the four Gospel writers have different readers who live in different contexts. This condition influenced their purpose in writing their Gospels. They each had a special mission in writing the gospel for a particular audience, which is also a difference between them.

Actually, the most visible difference is in their presentation of the portrait of Jesus. Matthew wanted Jesus to be seen as the King of the Jews or the promised Messiah, while John presents Jesus as the Son of God. This portrait should be taken into account when reading and trying to understand the miracle stories. We have to see the portrait of Jesus according to the glasses of the author.

However, these differences should not be regarded as a major problem, but rather as something that will take us to the original purpose of the author about Jesus. Leland Ryken said, "... the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel writers did not record everything about Jesus. They were highly selective in what they included. Through a combination of selection of material, arrangement, repetition, contrasts (foils), and interpretive commentary, each Gospel writer produced a verbal portrait in which certain features of Jesus and his message are highlighted."<sup>16</sup>

#### 6. Miracle Stories are Still Relevant for the Church Today

When we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus, we may question the relevance of this story. We see people get healed from their illness miraculously, but not the resurrection of the dead. The preacher is not only challenged to show its relevance, but also often consider it being irrelevant.

To interpret and apply the miracle stories, we must understand the nature of the Bible. Fee and Stuart write: "Because the Bible is God's Words, it has eternal relevance; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and every culture. Because it is God's Word, we must listen and obey."<sup>17</sup> If we agree with this statement, then we must also have faith that the miracle stories are still relevant for today. If we have an accurate meaning of the miracle stories, then we will be able to find its relevance for the church today.

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<sup>16</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 21.

## 7. The Hero of the Miracle Narratives Is Jesus

When we read about the kindness of Jesus, then we usually apply it by telling a story about how we must also be kind like Jesus. But problems arise when we read the miracle stories. We certainly hesitate to say that we also have to perform miracles like Jesus or we have to be a miracle worker like Jesus.

What is the purpose of the recording of miracle stories in the Gospels? The miracle stories in the Gospels function first *christologically* to demonstrate who Jesus was, and then *salvation-historically* to corroborate his claims that the kingship of God was breaking into human history.<sup>18</sup> Bryan Chapell believes everything that was revealed in the Scriptures, “. . . discloses God. In its proper context, every verse in the Bible in some sense points to his nature and work.”<sup>19</sup> It means that when a preacher tries to do the exegesis task, he has to understand “a text's full meaning in the context of its God-glorifying, gospel intent.”<sup>20</sup>

In the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand men, we found a boy who brought his lunch, the five loaves and two fishes to Jesus. We may apply this story by saying that we should take what we have to God. Whatever we submit to God with a sincere heart, He can use it miraculously. We should imitate the boy. It looks like the boy is the hero.

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<sup>18</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. exp. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 416.

<sup>19</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 275.

<sup>20</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 273.

However, the boy is not the hero. Jesus is the real hero. The miracle stories may have some other important characters in it but God remains the hero of every text.<sup>21</sup>

### Studying the Text

Preachers, as speakers of God, build and communicate on the concepts that are based on the text of the bible. But the question is in what sense a preacher is said to preach the word of God. Haddon Robinson provides a question as a litmus test to decide whether a sermon is biblical or not: "Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?"<sup>22</sup> This means that the passage of the text should govern the sermon.<sup>23</sup>

The commitment above is embodied on the preacher's desk in studying the text because God's word to us is the same as his Word to the first reader. Fee and Stuart write:

Because the Bible is God's Words, it has eternal relevance; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is God's Word, we must listen and obey. But because God chose to speak his Word through human words in history, every book in the Bible also has historical particularity; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written. . . Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the "tension" that exists between its eternal relevance and its historical particularity.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, studying the text is the most fundamental task. Finding the accurate meaning of the text is our ultimate goal.

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<sup>21</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 303.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 21.

The basic purpose of studying the text is to determine the author's intent. The biblical authors express their divine message in the human language and conditions of their times. To know what they meant by the messages, we have to understand their message consistent with the way and situation in that time to communicate messages. "A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers. This rule does not always help one find out what a text meant, but it does help to set limits as to what it cannot mean."<sup>25</sup> The intended meaning of any passage is the meaning that is consistent with the sense of the literary context in which it occurs.<sup>26</sup>

### The SIAM Method

While many preachers may agree with the above commitments, it does not necessarily mean that they will have a responsible bible interpretation method. We should appreciate their effort in getting the word across to the congregation. However, good intentions alone are not enough. Having good intentions is not the same as getting a responsible interpretation. Indeed, preachers usually don't say things that directly contradict the bible in their sermons, but miracle stories are one type of bible texts that are usually interpreted in improper ways. Preachers may think that they are preaching the meaning of the passage that the Gospel authors wanted to say to the original readers. When in fact, it is not.

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<sup>25</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 214.

Sidney Greidanus identifies four improper ways of interpreting biblical text.<sup>27</sup>

Although he intended it for all texts of the bible, it can be applied to the miracle texts, too. I rearranged them to get an acronym, SIAM, to help you to remember it:

1) Spiritualizing—turning the physical reality of a text into a spiritual analogy

Example: the story of Jesus stilling the storm is taken as a lesson on how Jesus handles “storms” on the “sea of life.”

The question for this interpretation is why there are only two or three elements interpreted? Why were the twelve disciples and the geographical condition not spiritualized? Greidanus says, “Spiritualizing does not preach the message of the text but deforms it. Moreover, the elements that are spiritualized and the parallels that are drawn to the hearers today are subjective and rather arbitrary choices.”<sup>28</sup>

2) Imitating Bible Characters—using biblical characters as unqualified examples to imitate.

Example: The story of Jairus’ daughter: we have to humble ourselves like Jairus did. He humbled himself although he has many slaves to command to meet Jesus. Jesus answers his request because he has faith and a faithful man is a humble man. The question is does Jairus really have an amazing faith in this situation? It’s a normal thing that people in very urgent situations will do everything to overcome it. The most reasonable thing for a man in Jairus’ situation is to do everything for his daughter’s healing. When he knew Jesus was in his area, he did the best for his daughter. He

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<sup>27</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 158-166.

<sup>28</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 161.

comes to Jesus and asks for his help. It is important to note that it's not about humbleness. The author does not have the intention of showing Jairus' humbleness.

3) Allegorizing—searching for a “real” meaning beneath the literal meaning of a text.

Example: the story of Jesus' turning water into wine is interpreted to mean the contrast between the old and the new dispensations; the water symbolizes a cleansing, and the transformation that takes place when a person's life is filled with the spirit.

My response for this interpretation is similar to the spiritualizing method. What is the meaning of the six stone water jars, the master of the banquet, Jesus' mother, Cana of Galilee, etc? The quest of the meaning in this method may bring us to the eisegesis, not exegesis. We use scripture to support our thoughts.

4) Moralizing—drawing moral or ethical demands from a text that neglects the text's true meaning and intention.

Example: Making a few relevant remarks about saying thank you based on the story of Jesus healing ten lepers (Luke 17).

My comment for this interpretation is why Luke used this story to teach his readers about thanksgiving. Why didn't he use an “ordinary” rather than “extraordinary” event to teach about thanksgiving? However, the basic question for this method is, is it indeed the intention of the author? Leander Keck writes, “Moralizing has the effect of transforming the Bible into an assortment of moral precepts and examples. The Bible's own agenda is replaced . . . The Bible's own way of thinking is sidetracked.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 102-3.

Regarding the examples I mentioned above, there is actually nothing wrong with the teachings that were applied to today's listeners. I agree that the Lord has the power to control everything in our lives and that we must humble ourselves before Him. However, it is not about whether you preach correctly or incorrectly before your congregation. It is about what you say the gospels' authors are saying. You must preach according to the author's original intention.

So what is the proper way to get the appropriate meaning of the text, especially miracle text of the Gospels? I use the acronym 3C Investigations to achieve this purpose: Context Investigation, Content Investigation, and Christological Investigation.

### Context Investigation

The Gospel is not written on a blank space. Gospels were written on earth, in certain circumstances, and in the culture and history of a particular community. Reading the Gospels in the context in which they were written will help the preacher to get the accurate message of the Gospel.

Usually, there are several aspects that should be investigated. You should have sufficient data to obtain the accurate message of the miracle text. You will focus your study on this part to four background variables: political, religious, socio-economics and geographical.<sup>30</sup> These are the basic things you should investigate to get enough

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<sup>30</sup> I owe to these backgrounds of the approach of Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 8-86.

supporting data to understand the context. More items can be added depending on the data that you need.

### **Political Investigation**

You may read the miracle stories in the Gospels using your own point of view, which is strongly influenced by the conditions in which you live. But your condition is different from that of the situation at the time the Gospels were written. Therefore, studying the background which includes the political situation at the time will greatly help you to understand the meaning of the miracle stories that the Gospel writers wanted to convey to their readers. You need to find answers to questions such as: Who were the political rulers at the time? How did they rule? How did their people feel about them?

When Jesus lived on earth Israel was under the occupation of the Roman Empire. No one lives happily under tyranny. Not surprisingly, the Jews looked forward to the presence of the Messiah who would set them free from Roman occupation. When a traditional Jew hears of the Messiah, the image he has in his mind is of a superhero who will defeat the Romans and drive them out of the country.

This messianic hope can be found in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand people. It is not just an event about the five thousand who ate the fish and loaves of bread. For the Jews this event reminds them of Moses feeding the Israelites. In Moses' time, their ancestors ate the bread from heaven, manna. In Exodus 16:15, Moses

describes the manna as "the bread that the LORD has given you to eat." Now, Jesus feeds them with the bread from the Lord. R. T. France says:

A belief that the event reveals Jesus as a new Moses, leader of God's people in the wilderness, may be a factor in the "political" enthusiasm which John associates with this event (John 6:14-15). Matthew does not directly draw attention to that aspect of the incident, though it is possible to interpret the urgency in the verb "compelled" in v. 22 as indicating that the disciples were infected with unhealthy popular enthusiasm so that Jesus wanted to get them away from the scene before him himself dealt with the crowd.<sup>31</sup>

Actually, this investigation helps us to understand why Jesus usually withdraws himself to another place after performing a miracle.

### **Religious Investigation**

The first miracle that was recorded in Matthew is the cleansing of a leper, Matthew 8:3. For the Jews, this miracle is very special and unique. Every Jew who reads this story would picture in their minds the Old Testament Laws of Moses which revealed that Leprosy is a symbol of uncleanness, meaning sin. Due to their condition, lepers . . . "were barred from Jerusalem and from all walled towns. In the synagogue there was provided for them a little isolated chamber, ten feet high and six feet wide, . . . Even in an open place it was illegal to greet a leper. If the wind was blowing upwind, you could not come nearer to a leper than 6 feet. If the wind was blowing downwind, you had to stay at least 150 feet away."<sup>32</sup> Simply put, a leper is considered the same as an unclean

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<sup>31</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 559.

<sup>32</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1*. rev. upd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 342.

person and is not allowed into the presence of God. In the same vein, all people are unclean due to their sinful nature. This first miracle in the Gospel of Matthew showed the Jews that Jesus came to make a person clean from sin and in doing so to reunite the cleansed man with the Holy God.

In order to convince the Jewish audience of the miracle of Jesus or events around it, the Gospel of Matthew paid special attention to the referencing of witnesses or persons involved. This reference is needed to fulfill the Old Testament requirement for proving the validity of events. When Jesus healed the leper in Matthew 8:1-4, he asked the leper to go to the priest according to the law of Moses, and get the priest to validate that he is now clean.<sup>33</sup> However, for the Gentiles who have different cultures, they do not have the custom or commandment to substantiate the event.

### **Social and Economics Investigation**

The next aspects that you need to explore in context investigation are the social and economic practices of the people in Jesus times. What was the social situation when Jesus was doing his earthly ministry? What were the most common occupations of the people at the time? Were there different social classes at the time? For example, in the story of a Syro-Phoenician who came to Jesus because her daughter was suffering from demon possession, you will find that Jesus appears to have driven the woman away. Many Bible readers would ask this situation. To solve this problem, you have to

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<sup>33</sup> Leviticus 14.

consider these social factors to answer this question: Why did Mark mention that she is a Syro-Phoenician woman and not just a woman?

Of course, when Mark identifies her as a Syro-Phoenician, it's not just to show her identity. There are some social factors by this identification and in this story; it also shows some social problems that she has. Simon Kistemaker describes her social problems as follows:

She was of Greek descent and was born in Syrian Phoenicia, now known as Lebanon. She was a Gentile who spoke both Greek and Aramaic and had lived in the city for some time. This woman had to overcome many barriers:

- She was a Gentile rather than a Jew
- She was a woman and therefore not allowed to speak to a man who was not a relative
- She was living in a pagan culture that worshipped heathen deities.<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes, when you find these factors, you also have to compare it with the other Gospels. In Matthew 15, you will find that Matthew mentions her as a Canaanite woman. Why did Mark and Matthew identify this woman differently? Why did Matthew identify this woman as Canaanite, not Syro-Phoenician? Is this difference related to the original readers and the purpose of their Gospels? Performing this investigation will give you a lot of data that can be used to help compose your sermon.

### **Geographical Investigation**

If you want your audience to go through thoroughly to the story of how Jesus calms the storm, it is not enough for you to focus on the panic in the boat. You need to

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<sup>34</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Miracles: Exploring the Mystery of Jesus's Divine Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 132.

describe how powerful the storm was that hit their boat. How powerful the storm can be explained by the geographical condition of the Lake of Galilee. William Barclay writes about the Lake of Galilee:

The Lake of Galilee was notorious for its storms. They came literally out of the blue with shattering and terrifying suddenness. A writer describes them like this: 'It is not unusual to see terrible squalls hurl themselves, even when the sky is perfectly clear, upon these waters which are ordinarily so calm. The numerous ravines which to the north-east and east debouch upon the upper part of the lake operate as so many dangerous defiles in which the winds from the heights of Hauran, the plateaux of Trachonitis, and the summit of Mount Hermon are caught and compressed in such a way that, rushing with tremendous force through a narrow space and then being suddenly released, they agitate the little Lake of Gennesaret in the most frightful fashion.' The voyager across the lake was always liable to encounter just such sudden storms as this.<sup>35</sup>

In his commentary on Luke, he gives the geological details:

The Sea of Galilee is famous for its sudden squalls. A traveler says, 'The sun had scarcely set when the wind began to rush down towards the lake, and it continued all night long with increasing violence, so that when we reached the shore next morning the face of the lake was like a huge boiling caldron.' The reason is this. The Sea of Galilee is more than six hundred feet below sea level. It is surrounded by table lands beyond which the great mountains rise. The rivers have cut deep ravines through the table lands down into the sea. These ravines act like great funnels to draw down the cold winds from the mountains; and thus the storms arise. The same traveler tells how they tried to pitch their tents in such a gale. 'We had to double-pin all the tent-ropes, and frequently were obliged to hang on with our whole weight upon them to keep the quivering tabernacle from being carried up bodily into the air.'<sup>36</sup>

Imagine if you were in the boat with the disciples. Nobody had the power to calm the storm. They were waiting for their fate after this storm, live or die. However, they saw something amazing that day. Jesus stood and calmed the storms. They may

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<sup>35</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark*. rev. upd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 132-3.

<sup>36</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*. rev. upd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 125.

know of some people who have gone through a storm safely but there is no one who has the power to calm a storm. But that day, for the first time they saw that there is a man who has that power. That is way they were amazed and asked Jesus' identity because there is no man who has power like that. Their question shows their confession implicitly. The man who stood before them is not an ordinary man. He is the God who created nature and the Lord who has the power over the storms.

### Content Investigation

The second thing you should investigate in studying the miracle text is the content of the text. In this stage, you try to find out what the meaning of the text is based on what the author wants to convey to his original readers. But if you read it without knowing how to read properly, you will not get to the original meaning. There are three tasks in this stage:

### Reading in Two Directions

Imagine yourself reading a paragraph in a newspaper. This paragraph is in the middle of the article. If you only read this paragraph, will you understand what you read accurately? I think you will have some difficulties in understanding it because you only read a small part of the article and you have to read the whole article as a single unit. You may only be interested in that specific paragraph, but you will not get the correct meaning if you ignore the rest of the article.

You can't understand the meaning of a miracle story if you ignore where the passage came from. To read the passage as a single unit, you need to read it in two directions.<sup>37</sup> First, read horizontally. As you read a passage in one Gospel, compare that presentation with the parallels (if they exist) in the other Gospels for clarity, emphasis, helpful rewording and added information. Second, read vertically. Read the materials before and after particular passages for it may alert you to the intended lesson.

### Read Vertically

When an author put a miracle story in his Gospel, the story doesn't usually stand apart from other texts. You may be familiar with your modern bible that groups a text with a title above it. Indeed, it helps us to read and understand the bible easily. But, it doesn't mean a passage stands alone and has no connection with the others.

A passage has its context and you have to read it in its own context in the Gospel to get the proper meaning. You have to put attention to the passages that precede and follow it. You have to determine the starting point in which the story unit begins and the ending point in which the unit finishes. This unit is the context of the passage you want to preach.

Let's look at the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree (Mark 11: 12-14, 20-25). In this story, the author inserts the story of Jesus clearing the temple (11:15-19). You may lose the meaning of the story if you read verses 12-14, 20-25 only. These parts are a literary unit with verses 15-19. It means that the meaning of the text should be

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<sup>37</sup> For this part, I owe Fee and Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 135-40.

understood with the story of Jesus clearing the temple as literary unit. The flow of thought begins in verse 12. Therefore, you have to interpret Mark 11:12-25 correctly first, before you focus on your passage in 12-14, 20-25.

The main task of this stage is to determine the relationship of the text to what precedes and follows it. You have to ask the question "Does this passage stand alone or it is part of the unit?" You will not get the author's intention to his original readers if you ignore its passage context or literary unit.

#### Read Horizontally

One of the usual ways of modern readers in reading the Gospel is to try to summarize the same story from each of the author's perspective and compose a new story from the modern reader's perspective. Indeed, we are usually tempted to get the complete story. There is nothing wrong with our good intention. However, the question is why did God allow four evangelists to write the Gospels from different perspectives if one perspective is the best way?

Each gospel has a theological emphasis, especially on who Jesus is. Therefore, to identify the traits and characteristics of each book is the first thing that must be done to understand their own news. Sidney Greidanus said, "by studying the composition of each Gospel and by comparing it with the other three Gospels, one becomes aware of the differences among the Gospels: they offer not identical photographs of Jesus but

four unique portraits.”<sup>38</sup> There is only one task in this part: comparing our text with parallel texts in the other Gospels. Fee and Stuart said,

First, the parallels will often give us an appreciation for the distinctive of any one of the Gospels. After all, it is precisely their distinctive that are the reason for having four Gospels in the first place. Second, the parallels will help us to be aware of the different kinds of contexts in which the same or similar materials lived in the ongoing church.<sup>39</sup>

Mark and Luke recorded the same story on demon possession. We may not get significant distinctives if we only read from a single source only. The first miracle took place in a synagogue where a man possessed by a demon cries out and knows Jesus as “of Nazareth” and “the Holy One of God.” It gives the impression that Luke uses this event to support his claim that Jesus is the Son of Man and the Son of God. Also, the statement from him, “Have you come to destroy us” gives the impression that Jesus is the anointed one who has the great power.

However, what is interesting here is that we do not find the demon crying out after Jesus rebuked him like Mark did.<sup>40</sup> He cries out when Jesus comes and challenges Him. In contrast with Mark, Luke recorded that the demon didn’t cry out when Jesus rebuked him. If Mark records the demon convulsing the man (Mark 1:26), Luke shows that the demon did the man no harm as he said in v. 35, “threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.” It gives the impression that Luke wants to present Jesus as a person who has great power to control everything, including the spirit

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<sup>38</sup> Sidney Greidanus “Preaching in the Gospels” in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duda (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 337.

<sup>39</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> Mark 1:26: “The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” It’s fit with the characteristic of Mark that pays attention to the action and reaction.

world. Darrell Bock said, "He possesses command over the world of evil. The evil forces obey him, even while they dominate people. Jesus' first miracle, appropriately enough, is against the forces of evil, for he offers that which is good and holy to humanity."<sup>41</sup>

To do this task completely and properly, preachers should have a basic description about the characteristics of the four Gospels.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the four Gospels**

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Author	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Primary Audience	Jews	Romans or Jews in Rome	Gentiles	Greeks or Jews
Purpose	to convince Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament	to show Jesus is the son of God and how he accomplishes his mission in this world	to give historically detailed account of Jesus' life and ministry.	to present what Jesus did is to prove that Jesus is God so that people will trust in him for salvation
Portrait of Jesus	Messiah	Son of God and the faithful servant	Perfect Man	God
General Features <sup>42</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roughly 60 percent of the book is Jesus' words, teaching as rabbi</li> <li>- About 50 Old Testament quotes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Briefest Gospel</li> <li>- Few Old Testament Quotations</li> <li>- Explain Jewish words and customs for non-Jews</li> <li>- Gospel of action</li> <li>- 150 present tense verbs emphasizing Jesus' actions</li> <li>- 40 percent of the book is Jesus' words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roughly 50 percent of the book is Jesus' words</li> <li>- Thirteen women mentioned that are omitted from other Gospels</li> <li>- Jewish customs explained</li> <li>- A focus on Jesus' early years and emotional life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roughly 90 percent of John is unique to John</li> <li>- No parables</li> <li>- Seven "I am" statements of Jesus prove he is God</li> </ul>
Miracle Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Miracle is the evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The fastest in recording the first miracle story: 21 verses</li> <li>- The most in recording miracles: 35</li> <li>- The only gospel that records Jesus' commands to keep a miracle secret</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There are 7 miracles</li> <li>- No exorcisms</li> </ul>

<sup>41</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 435.

<sup>42</sup> This item is modification of Mark Driscoll, *On the New Testament: A Book You Will Actually Read* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 56.

Identifying the general and theological characteristics of each writer will help us to understand the message of the miracle stories that are presented by the authors.

### **Reading the Text in Author's Original Language**

Once we read our text horizontally and vertically, the next step is reading the text in the author's original language. Some preachers may say that they do not have enough skill in biblical languages. Yes, we have different skills in Hebrew or Greek but there are many tools around us that can help us understand the text in the original language. Commentaries, lexicon and bible computer software might help us to understand the original language of the miracle texts.

Why do we have to read the text in its original language? First, the limitation of language. When we read a word in Greek, it does not mean that the word has an accurate equivalent in our language. For example there are 4 words for love in Greek: *agaphe*, *eros*, *philea*, and *storge*. Why are there 4 different words for love in Greek? Of course, every word has its own meaning and the author can use one of them in his language to communicate a specific message to his readers. In other instances, he may use a different word for love to communicate a different message although it has the same meaning in our language, love.

Secondly, Don Sunukjian says, "the original languages sometimes reveal an ambiguity that English translators have interpretively resolved. While their solution

might be helpful and accurate, it might also reflect a doctrinal bias or at least an interpretative viewpoint that should be held tentatively until further study is done.”<sup>43</sup>

Third, the biblical grammar is not just about the matter of time, but also the matter of meaning. For example, we know imperfect tense in Greek. This tense appears in Mat. 8:24 to tell us that Jesus was sleeping. Usually, we use this tense to show continued action in past time. However, we can go deeper to identify the kind of imperfect. William Mounce in his Matthew 8:24 analysis said,

... the imperfect was not simply “continued action in past time.” Various nuances called for new designations. For example, something might begin to take place in the past so this was called an ingressive imperfect. If the imperfect in Matt 8:24 were in this category the clause would mean that Jesus “was starting to fall asleep.” However, if it was an iterative imperfect then we would understand that Jesus “kept going to sleep.” But wait, there are more. If customary imperfect, then Jesus “was asleep as usual” (perhaps the motion of the boat and the fresh wind always put him to sleep). If the imperfect was conative it could be something he desired (he “wanted to go to sleep”), attempted (he was “trying to go to sleep”), or almost happening (he was “about to go to sleep.”)<sup>44</sup>

The nuance determines the meaning.

Matthew, Mark and Luke recorded the story of how Jesus calmed the storm. It looks like there are no significant differences in this story. However, Mark had a different perspective on it. When we read this story carefully, we will find the difference in the word that is used in verse 39, “He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves.” The Greek word for “rebuke” is *pephimōso*. This word is used when Jesus

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<sup>43</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> William D. Mounce, “Imperfect, and How to Think about Grammar” in <http://www.billmounce.com/blog/topic/imperfect-tense>. Accessed May 21, 2011.

encountered Satan or a demon. Using this word indicates as if it is Satan who is the cause of the wind and waves that are trying to destroy them and their boat.

You can find the special meaning in your passage, not only by the word choice used by the Gospels authors, but also other words but with same meaning. As I mentioned above, there are four different words for love in Greek. When you see one of these words being used, you have to ask, "Why did the author decide to choose this word? What does he mean?" In this step, you need help from dictionaries. I have found the following resources to be particularly helpful:

Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. 3 volumes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. 4 volumes. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-86.

### **Reading the Text as a Story**

The third task in Content Investigation is reading the text as a story. There are **four P's** that you need to analyze.

#### **a. Persons**

**The miracle worker: Jesus.** The miracle stories of the Gospels are about Jesus. He is the only miracle worker in every miracle event. He is the main character in the event or the protagonist in the story. If you ignore or move your focus to other character in the story, you will lose the meaning of the story.

Every story has a central character. This is simply one of the principles of selectivity and emphasis that storytellers impose on their material. The central character is called the protagonist. . . . *pay attention to what happens to protagonist in the story.* Stories are built around the protagonist.<sup>45</sup>

If you agree that the content of the Gospel is about Jesus, then the central figure in the story must be Jesus.

**The miracle recipient.** The second character in a miracle story is the person who experiences the miracle events directly. The recipient is a character or some in the story who needs help from Jesus. Sometimes, the recipient is the one who is directly affected by the miracle. In Matthew 8, the recipient is the leper. In John 9, the recipient is the man who was born blind. Sometimes, we find a different condition that the recipient is the one who asks Jesus' help for somebody. Mostly, this condition happened to people who were raised from the dead: the centurion's servant (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10), the Canaanite mother (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), etc.

**The miracle eyewitness.** The eyewitnesses are the people who are present during the miracle events. The eyewitnesses may be Jesus' disciples, people in the synagogue (Mark 1:21-28), a large crowd (Luke 9:37-42) etc. These eyewitnesses usually show a response after they saw a miracle. The large crowd, which gathered when Jesus raised a widow's son in Nain, shows their response. Luke recorded it: "They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has

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<sup>45</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 43.

come to help his people.” (Luke 7:16). However, the response that is shown is not always an enthusiastic one. Sometimes people show a skeptical or negative response. After Jesus heals a man who was born blind and mute, the Pharisees said, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” After he raised Lazarus from the dead, the chief priests and Pharisees plot to kill Jesus as John recorded in his Gospel, 11:45-57.

#### b. Place and Times

The place is the story’s physical dimension. It’s important to ask did this event happen outdoors or indoors? If it happened outdoors, what kind of a place is it? Is it the mountain, the lake, the beach or the flat dessert? Is it a hidden place or a place that people usually frequent? If it happened in a house or building, what did it look like? When you are preparing a sermon on Jesus healing a man at the Pool of Bethesda, you need to describe the pool. Where was the pool situated in the building? Is it in the middle or in the corner? This information will help you to understand why this man said to Jesus, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me” (John 5:7).

You also have to determine approximately when the miracle story took place in the ministry of Jesus. Of course, we cannot possibly provide an accurate time but we can determine the period that these events occurred in. Usually Jesus’ ministry is divided into five periods: (1) Beginning of public ministry, (2) Galilean ministry, (3) Later Judea-Perean ministry, (4) Final Week and Crucifixion, (5), Resurrection and ascension

appearances.<sup>46</sup> You have to determine the period in which the miracle event happened.

It's also important to analyze the time of day. When did the miracle happen? Is it morning, afternoon or night? In the story of 5 loaves and 2 fishes, it happened in the afternoon. When Jesus calmed the storms, we can predict it happened at night. It helps us to understand why the disciples were in a panic.

### c. Perspectives

The perspective will help the preacher to get how this event can be seen from a different angle. It is needed to understand how people in this event think about this event. What did the author think about the event? Were the author's thoughts in-line with the other people involved in the event?

**Author.** The author, inspired by God, is the "omniscient" one in this story. He knows how Jesus feels when he met Mary and Martha after Lazarus died. He knows the hidden motivation when people follow Jesus after he feeds them with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. He stands on Jesus' side. He is not only having something to say to the original readers, but it looks like Jesus asks him to tell what Jesus wants to say to the people through him in the event. He has Jesus' perspective and knows what the purpose of Jesus performing some miracle is. He tries to get it across. He has something to say behind the story he told and that's why he is author of narrator of the story.

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<sup>46</sup> Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (London: United Bible Societies, 1986), 43-54.

You need to find out his purpose to tell the story to his readers. It really helps you to get the accurate meaning of the story. The response of the people in the story can help you to understand the purpose. In the event of Jesus walking on water, you will find the sentence, "Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matt 14:33). This sentence is not said out of the disciples' mouth. It comes out from the author. His purpose to record and present the story is to show who Jesus is to his readers.

However, he doesn't always show the response like the above one. In the story Jesus heals ten lepers (Luke 17), the author's purpose can be found on the leper were healed who thanked to Jesus and Jesus' response to his returning. According to Graham Twelftree, "Luke wants his readers to understand that this leper was not merely healed. In his initial willingness to call to Jesus and probably also in his returning to praise God, he had also opened himself to God's salvation, which includes healing. That this returning to give thanks was one of the factors in the man being pronounced "saved" is obvious in that the other nine were not so pronounced. . . . healing and salvation are not the same thing for Luke in this particular story."<sup>47</sup>

**People.** People are not the "omniscient" in the story. They only know what they see and feel. They usually show their response after they see and feel what happened. Sometimes, they show responses as a response that the author hopes for, but they did not understand the meaning of the miracle. You may not put their response in the true

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<sup>47</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 163.

or false box and use the positive response only. The author, in the guidance of God who inspires them to write these stories, chose to use both responses in their story.

The response is not always showed in the same passage of the miracle events. John 6:1-15 recorded the story Jesus feeds the five thousand. The people's response is showed in the next passage. Obviously, they didn't understand the meaning of Jesus' miracle. They, who had seen the miracle, still ask for "a sign so they can believe Jesus (6:30). They cite Exodus 16:15 as evidence that Jesus should reproduce the miracle of the manna if he is to be accepted as the Messiah (John 6:31). Jesus corrects his audience (6:31-33). Then occurs an exegetical debate in which Jesus explains the meaning of Exodus 16:15 (John 6:34-48). The discourse turns to revolve around the notion of "eating" (6:49-58). . . . As important as the miracles are in the revealing the identity of Jesus, the miracles are not to be sought for their own sake. Rather, Jesus himself is to be sought (John 6:27, 35, 51-55)."<sup>48</sup>

#### d. Plot

After you study the third P, you are now in the last P. The plot will help preachers to understand the story and get the message across. An Israeli scholar Shimon Bar-Efrat says, "The plot serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader's interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the

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<sup>48</sup> Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 208. If you familiar with Bryan Chapell's emphasis on the "fallen-condition focus," described in his book *Christ-Centered Preaching*, you can identify the crowd's response to Jesus as the fallen condition in this story. As the fallen creatures, we interested to God's gift, more than God himself. For details see Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 48-52.

events with meaning.”<sup>49</sup> Generally, the stories in the bible have four stages.<sup>50</sup> I use the abbreviation SCRC with the suffix *-ion* to help you remember the items: Situation, Complication, Resolution, and Conclusion.

**Situation.** The situation provides the setting and the background of the story. You may say that this stage is the introduction part of the story. Indeed, the situation introduces the information and background before the miracle happens.

John 11 provides the background and situation before the Jesus raised Lazarus. There are 44 verses in the story and 19 verses provide the setting of the event. In these 19 verses, you will get information on who are Lazarus and his family. Where does he live? How serious was his sickness? Why did Jesus choose to stay two more days even though Jesus knows how serious his illness is? When did Jesus arrive in Bethany? Also, you will get the information about Bethany (11:18) and that many Jews are with Mary and Martha until the fourth day of Lazarus’ death.

Sometimes, you have to read the preceding passages to get background of the story. In the story Jesus calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-43), you need to read from 4:1. This event happened after Jesus teaches some parables. He was getting into a boat and sat in it out on the lake. After the class finished, he said to the disciples to go over to

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<sup>49</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 93.

<sup>50</sup> In 1980s, Eugene Lowry proposes five sequential stages to a typical sermonic process: 1. Upsetting equilibrium, 2. Analyzing the discrepancy, 3. Disclosing the clue to resolution, 4. Experiencing the gospel, and 5. Anticipating the consequences. In 2000s, he made a minor modification on stage 3 and 4. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28-87.

the other side of the lake. They just learned and listened to God's word several hours ago before they had the storm on the lake.

**Complication.** The tension rises in this stage. You will find conflict, crisis and unsolved problems in this stage. The complication when Jesus feeds the five thousand is in John 6:5-7. In this story, the author describes the situation in verse 1-4. He mentions the place, the characters in the story, what they were doing together and when this event occurred. Then, he moved to the complication. The complication or the problem arose when Jesus said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" They were up on the mountainside and it's difficult to find a restaurant or a bakery. On the other hand, the people have to eat after they are together with Jesus throughout the day. In this example, the characters do not have any problems at the beginning until they encounter one in the middle of the story.

Sometimes, complication arises in the condition where a character has the problem and others do not. In Luke 7:11-17, Jesus and his followers do not have a problem but the group who meets them has. It becomes the complication in the story. It was not when the widow's son died. The complication arises when this group of people meets Jesus and his group. The complication does not depend on the perspective of the people in the story but on the author or narrator.

**Resolution.** You may say this is the climax of the story. In this stage the main character (Jesus) did something for the people who interacted with him. The climax of the story

of Jesus healing the blind man is when the man's eyesight is restored. The climax of the story of Jesus raising the dead is when the dead came back to life. These people (objects of the miracle) are in the new condition that is not the same with their condition before. In this stage, the problem is solved through the presence of the main character.

**Conclusion.** The conclusion is the last stage of the story. In this part, you will see the new situation and the people's response to the resolution. According to Steven Mathewson, "The conclusion or denouement generally sums up the outcome of the story or the fate of the main characters in the wake of resolution. Or the conclusion can offer a special message to the reader."<sup>51</sup>

Sometimes the conclusion of a story could also be the situation for the next story. For example, read Matthew 14:13-33 or Mark 6:30-52. There are two stories in these passages, Jesus feeds the five thousand and Jesus walks on the water. The conclusion of the first story functions as the situation for the second story.

In the conclusion, you may find that people usually show their responses on what happened before. They praised God on what happened, but sometimes they show a conflicting response. They may fulfill the author's hope or not at all. Sometimes they understand who Jesus is but sometimes they do not. The stories do not always have a happy ending.

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<sup>51</sup> Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 47.

## Christological Investigation

One of the challenges of studying miracles in Christianity in this decade is that miracle stories can also be found in other religions' sacred texts. If you preach the miracle stories on a Sunday morning and you have a visitor from a different faith, he may have this question in his mind, "So, what is the difference? In my scripture, I read many similar miracle stories."

In making a miracle stories sermon, our task is to show the difference with that of the other religions. We have to show the difference between miracle stories in the Bible and other religious scriptures. The key question in this investigation is: what does this passage reveal about the person and work of Jesus Christ?<sup>52</sup> In this step, preachers struggle with what the four evangelists want to say to their readers about Jesus, "... that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

The focus and center of the miracle stories in the Gospels is Jesus, the Miracle Worker. Miracle stories are about Jesus, not other people. In the story where Jesus feeds the five thousand, the central character is not the boy who brought his five loaves and two fishes. The hero is Jesus. Martin Noth writes, "a legitimate 're-presentation' cannot use the individual human figures of biblical history as its subjects, either as ethical 'models,' which they in fact never are, or as exemplary 'heroes of faith' since in

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<sup>52</sup> I have been inspired for this step by the work of Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999),

the biblical narratives they are never so presented, or as representatives of true humanity whose experiences . . . are to be imitated.”<sup>53</sup>

You may read the story where Jesus raises Lazarus and be interested in the dialog between Jesus, Mary and Martha. How Jesus reacted, including when he cried is a very interesting point. Based on this point, you may conclude that what John wants to say to his reader is that Jesus showed his care to Mary and Martha or we have to show our care to others as Jesus did. I believe Jesus is the most caring man who ever lived. However, John the apostle didn't wish to say that. If John meets you, he may say: “Pastor, I agree with you that my teacher has a deep care for Mary and Martha. However, I do not mean to say it in chapter 11 of my Gospel. What you mean is not what I meant.”

In the Content Investigation step, you will get information about the four Gospels, especially the author's purpose. The purpose of John's Gospel can be read in John 20:31. John wants his readers to put their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Lord of life. In relation to the raising of Lazarus, George Eldon Ladd said:

The raising of Lazarus only illustrates the fact that the eternal life that is present in Jesus is, in fact, the life of the eschatological resurrection realized on the spiritual level in history (11:25). These miracles as a whole are the kind of miracles expected by the Jews with the dawn of the messianic age. This is analogous to Jesus' answer in the Synoptic Gospels to the question of John's disciples, in his works, the prophecies of the messianic Kingdom were being fulfilled (Mat. 11:2ff).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> As quoted in Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 163.

<sup>54</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 310.

As with the other mighty works, the clearest markers within the text point toward the eschatological intrusion of God's kingdom into the world. Martha affirms that Lazarus will rise on the last day; Jesus counters that this future reality is already present in himself, the resurrection and the life (11:24-5). Jesus' call to the entombed Lazarus is a clear echo of the prophecy of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 (underscored by the prior allusion to Ezekiel in John 5:28-9). But the magnitude of this miracle demands that the reader probe more deeply into Jesus' identity and his relationship with the creator God. Lazarus has been dead for four days, so his call from the grave is virtually a *creatio ex nihilo*. Again, chapter 5 of John provides the appropriate commentary: "Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has given to the Son to have life in himself." We are drawn thence back to the prologue: in him was life (1:4).<sup>55</sup>

However, the meaning of the story will be more visible if we continue our reading to verses 45-57, with Caiaphas plotting Jesus' death. Jesus gave life to the dead Lazarus and Caiaphas wants to take Jesus' life.<sup>56</sup> We may understand the significance of both events in the words of Caiaphas, "it is better for you that one man dies for the people than the whole nation perish" (11:50). "The raising of Lazarus, the last sign in the ministry of Jesus, was to lead to his death on behalf of all (cf. Mark 10:45)."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 35-36.

<sup>56</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 322.

<sup>57</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 217.

The Gospels authors have something to say about Jesus. It means we must find what the Gospel writer said about Jesus to determine the original message of the text that we are investigating.

### **The Arrow and the Target**

When you get up in the morning and read the newspaper, you would immediately look at the headlines. You read the headlines because it gives you a rough idea of what the story is about. When you see an ad in one of the pages, you will also find a short and prominent sentence. It's the main message they want to convey. When you read your Bible, there is a title in the passage that you read and it states its content. Likewise, when someone tells you something and you have to tell it again some other time; your mind will automatically summarize it into the main idea. Ideas and humans have become something that cannot be separated.

The sermon should have a main idea too. After you pass through 3C investigation in making the miracle sermon, you have to summarize all of your findings in one main or big idea. A clear big idea will make your sermon easier to understand for your audience. On the other hand, if you do not know what your sermon big idea is, the audience will be like the blind who leads the blind.

## Discovering the Big Idea

The big idea is composed of two components: a subject and a complement.<sup>58</sup>

The subject shows the problem in the question form: "What is the author talking about?" The complement answers the questions or solves the problem, "What is the author saying about what he is talking about?"

For example, is the story of Jesus raising Lazarus. It is not just a miracle event. This story tells us how John presents that Jesus is the Son of God as the purpose of his Gospel. Only him who has the ability, power and authority to raise the dead. Moreover, Jesus states in John 11:25 that He is the resurrection and the life. Indeed, this *I am* states who Jesus is, but it also shows that Jesus has authority to resurrect and power over life. Accordingly, the story is about Jesus who has the power and authority over the death and life. So, the subject and the complement of this story:

Subject: Why could Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead?

Complement: Because he has the authority over life and death

How about the story of Jesus healing the leper in Matthew 8:1-4? To get the message of this story, you have to understand the purpose of Matthew's writings. Matthew aims to present and confirm Jesus as the Son of David and the Messiah who was prophesied by the Old Testament prophets.

Subject: How does Jesus show God's compassion to the Leper?

Complement: He heals the leper.

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<sup>58</sup> I have to admit my indebtedness to Haddon Robinson. Homiletics students who know *Biblical Preaching* will detect similarity to his work.

Due to the strong Jewish background in this Gospel, you have to understand the meaning of the word leper theologically. Every Jew who reads this story would have in their mind the Old Testament laws of Moses which state that leprosy is a symbol of uncleanness, or sin. Simply put, a leper was the same as an unclean person and was not allowed into the presence of God. Similarly, all people are said to be unclean due to our sinful natures. Understanding this meaning, one gets this theological idea:

Subject: How does Jesus show God's love to the sinners?

Complement: He forgives their sins.

### The Christological Big Idea

Preaching miracle stories of the Gospels is not just a matter of finding the big idea, but also the Christological Big Idea. This stage is the main characteristic in making the Gospels miracle sermon. This stage shows the significant difference between Christ and other religions' founders and figures. In other religions, their founders or figures also perform miracles. This stage will answer the question, "So, what is the difference between Christ and others?"

In this stage, you will learn how to get the Christological Big Idea in order to show the difference between Jesus and other miracle workers. In the earlier stage, you learned how to get the big idea from the text. After you get your big idea, you have to apply your big idea into Christological questions to get the Christological Big Idea. The function of these questions is not to make a new idea, but to check the big idea that you found. In chapter 2, we read the rules of making miracle story sermons. The miracle

stories are about Jesus. He is the only and the true hero in the story. The questions will help you to keep on the track with the nature of miracle text.

In systematic theology, we usually find the terms *The Person and Works of Christ* in Christological study or section. These terms explore the identity of Jesus and his works during his earthly ministry. Now, we will use these terms to compose the questions.

Question 1: Who is Christ in this event?

Question 2: What did he do in this event?

*The Person* is about Jesus' identity. Who is Jesus according to the author of the Gospel? God inspired Gospel writers, so we should find the picture of Jesus according to their presentation. Inspiration from God makes the authors present the figure of Jesus that could not be found in the scriptures of other religions.

For example, people usually think the big idea of the five loaves and two fish is that if we give the ordinary to Jesus, he will change it into the extraordinary. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with the idea. But it's not about the little boy or Andrew who brought this boy. It's about Jesus. When you ask the questions, especially the first one, you will find that your big idea says nothing about Jesus' identity. It means you have to return to the earlier stage get the accurate big idea.

*The Works* is about what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. His work cannot be separated from his identity. He always performs miracles in connection with his identity. Indeed, there are people who benefits from his miracle but they are not the reason why he performs it. His identity is the only reason he performs miracles.

For example, people usually think the big idea of Mark 4:35-41 is that Jesus has the power to calm the storms in your life. Once again, there is nothing wrong with the idea but does the text say he would calm the storm in your life? This idea says Jesus has the power and it is true, he has great power. When you ask the Christological questions, the first and the second one, you will find that the words "... in your life" are not the proper words. Like the example above, you have to return to the earlier stage to get the accurate one.

Below are examples on how to apply the principles above into the texts of Matthews 21 and Mark 1:21-28. We will look at the passages thoroughly.

The event in Matthew 21 occurs when Jesus and his disciples, while traveling from Bethany to Jerusalem, pass through the little village of Bethphage. The appearance of leaves on a fig tree in this region is a promise of the sweet early fig. However, this tree is not productive, bearing no figs at all. This becomes an appropriate metaphor for Jesus to use to show Israel's spiritual condition, providing a striking lesson for the disciples. Just as the fig tree's fruitfulness is a sign of its health, fruitfulness is a sign of Israel's faithfulness to the covenantal standards. The cursing of the tree, then, is the same as the judgment of God over someone who lives in sin. Now that Israel, especially under its religious leadership, has perverted the temple practices and has not repented at the appearance of Jesus the Messiah proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, is being judged by God.

However, it's not the end. You have to continue your analysis to the whole book of Matthew. I think you will find in your investigation that this miracle is the last one in

Matthew. So, what is the first miracle in Matthew? The first miracle recorded in Matthew is the cleansing of a leper, found in Matthew 8:3. For the Jews, this miracle is special and unique. Every Jew who reads this story would have in their mind the Old Testament laws of Moses which state that leprosy is a symbol of uncleanness, or sin.

The placement of those events at the beginning and the end of Matthew's gospel shows that Jesus' coming fulfills the prophecy of the Old Testament. Nobody has ability to heal leprosy except the One whose coming was prophesied by the prophets. However, He did not come simply to help his people, but also to judge those who have not repented. They may hope to receive help and comfort from their Messiah, but they also have to repent and bear fruit in their lives. The miracle in these events shows us that no one can do these two things, to help and to judge, except the Messiah. He will deliver humans from the curse of sin, but he will also judge (and curse) humans who live in sin. The Messianic messages invite the readers of the Gospel to come to Jesus and he will give them rest (Matt 11:30) and judgment for those who do not believe in him (Matt 19:28).

The exegetical big idea of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew 21 is that Jesus cursed it because it did not bear fruit. The theological idea here is that Jesus is going to punish people who do not bear fruit in his life. You will find a similar truth, however, if you learn the miracle stories of other religions. The gods will punish people who do not meet their demands or are not useful to them. Moreover, the gods in other religions would also punish people who do not produce good (fruit) in their life. What about the Christological big idea from this text?

As we see in Matthew's Gospel, we will try to find how Matthew presents Jesus as the promised Messiah. Who is the Messiah? He is the King promised by God and He has power and authority over all things. He has the power to condemn but he also has the power to forgive man's sin. He even gave his life to redeem human beings. We consider the first miracle in Matthew as about God's forgiveness. When we saw this data, we will find the Christological big idea: *Jesus has authority to forgive and to condemn.*

The second example is Mark 1:21-28. Mark introduces his Gospel using three aspects of Jesus' life. First, he begins with the ultimate identity: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and supports this claim with a short prophecy from the Old Testament and the role of John the Baptist on his mission. He moves very quickly to the second part: the baptism of Jesus. He also supports his claim in verse one with a noted claim from God, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Once again, Mark moves on very rapidly to the third part: the calling of the first disciples. It is as if he wants to say to his readers, "Okay, I think the introduction is enough and now we go on to the 'real' story."

We need only to read the first 21 verses of this Gospel to find Jesus' first miracle story: an exorcism at the synagogue. The recording of this event (and other miracle stories) is also intended to show another kind of supremacy. Jesus' miracles are closely connected to the proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. Jesus' exorcisms are to be construed as successful attacks of the reign of God against the kingdom of Satan.

"They knew that Jesus was believed by some at least to be the Messiah; they knew that

the reign of the Messiah was the end of the demons; and the man who believed himself to be possessed spoke as a demon when he came into the presence of Jesus.”<sup>59</sup> It shows the supremacy of the kingdom of God over kingdoms and nations all over the world.

The first miracle takes place in a synagogue where a man possessed by a demon cries out and knows him as “of Nazareth” and “the Holy One of God.” It gives the impression that Luke uses this event to support his claim that Jesus is the Son of Man and the Son of God. Also, this statement from the possessed man, “Have you come to destroy us?” gives the impression that Jesus is the anointed one who has great power.

However, what is interesting here is that Mark says that the demon cries out when Jesus comes and challenges Jesus. After Jesus rebukes him, the demon also cries out. Mark shows the man has no control on himself and the demon causing the man to undergo convulsions (Mark 1:26).

The demon has control over the man and no man in the room can help this possessed man. It shows the demon has higher authority over man’s authority. When Jesus rebukes the demon, it shows he possesses command over the world of evil, even the universe. The demon and Satan obey him, even while they have control and authority over the people. This event shows Jesus’ authority against the forces of evil. If everything that the evil one does is bad to humanity, he offers what is good and holy to humanity. I agree with Don Sunukjian on the big idea of this text: *Jesus has authority over everything in this life.*

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<sup>59</sup> Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark*, 39.

## The Better Big Idea

Imagine, after you preach your sermon on Sunday morning, a member of your congregation asks you, “Pastor, just give me one sentence only from your sermon. It’s hard for me to remember the whole content of your sermon. Give me a sentence as a take-home-truth.” What will you say to him or her? I think you will try to say the best words to him or her as take-home-truth. You will compose the best sentence to SHARE to your congregation.

### Sharp

Considering these two ideas: “If you have faith, you will listen to God’s word and obey it in your lives faithfully” and “Faith is listening to and obeying God’s word” What is the difference between the two? Which one do you prefer? The second one is specific, concrete, and solid. Haddon Robinson says, “It has to be narrow enough to get under your skin as a preacher. It’s a clear answer to the question, *what exactly am I talking about?* If you have a vague idea, if it’s too broad, too general, too abstract, it doesn’t do anything for you. However, when you get one that is sharp enough to get into your soul that is important.”<sup>60</sup>

### Hit

The second characteristic of a good big idea should have the power to hit the audience. It is not sufficient just to be sharp enough but also powerful enough. The key

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<sup>60</sup> Robinson, “Better Big Ideas,” 353.

question to this characteristic is: "Does this idea make a difference?" The idea of Jesus raising Lazarus may be like this: "Jesus has the authority over life and death." It is sharp enough but it can be modified: "If you stay out of Jesus, you never get life." This idea emphasizes that the audience will have to make a decision on where they want to be. Our listeners may know that Jesus has authority over life and death. However, the next question is what is the connection with me? The last idea answers the question. The connection is you have to decide, stay in or out of him.

### **Accurate**

After you compose your big idea into the *sharp* and *hit* criteria, you need to ask, "Do I say what the Bible says?" We are the heralds of God and it means we just say what God wants us to say. When preachers stand on the pulpit, God wants his preachers say his word. Haddon Robinson said:

We are not simply philosophers as preachers. We are not motivational speakers. We are people entrusted with God's Word. One of the great things about working with Scripture is that it's a book of great ideas, because its words reflect the reality of God and how God intersects with us. We go to the Scriptures to get our ideas.

That means when I come to the Bible, I have to recognize that's what it is. It's a book of ideas—not just a book of words or phrases or isolated verses. The biblical writers were attempting to get across ideas, and I have to see that when I come to a biblical text. I have to look for it, and you don't get trivial ideas in the Bible. The more you work with the Scriptures, the more you recognize you're dealing with depth and greatness.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Robinson, "Better Big Ideas," 354-5.

Even though you complete studying the text, it's good to double-check your big idea.

Remember, your congregation will take your big idea into their daily lives. Your big idea must be true and true to the Word of God.

### **Relevance**

The fourth characteristic is your idea to connect with your audience's lives.

When you compose your big idea, it's not enough to think that the big idea is biblical.

You also have to think, "Will my audience buy this idea?" They will accept your idea if they see the connection with their daily lives.

Usually preachers use doctrinal words pregnant with theological meaning to their audience. Actually, nothing is wrong with that but you have to remember that you made your big idea for your people to take home. People should see clearly "how God intersects with our lives and how life looks when we take seriously that the God of the Bible is really there." A relevant big idea is when preachers show how the message connects to the hearer's life.<sup>62</sup>

### **Easy to Memorize**

The last characteristic of the big idea is that it is easy to memorize. Preachers should remember that their audience will apply the idea into their daily lives. I think every preacher wishes the audience to memorize it for long period. It means that

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<sup>62</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Revelance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 106.

preachers should think of the best way for their audience to remember it well in their daily lives.

People will remember an idea with two characteristics: first, it contains simple words. It's more useful to use simple words than technical words. Preachers may have more vocabulary than their audience. It's useless, however, if your audience do not understand it at all. You have to think not only the best word but also the words that they can understand.

Second, it is short enough. People will remember "Faith is listening to and obeying God's word" than "If you have faith, you will listen to God's word and obey it in your lives faithfully." The first idea is short enough and easier to remember than the second. People just need to remember 7 words to be done in their lives. This idea will be nailed down strongly in their mind in this way.

### Determining the Sermon Purpose

After you think through your text and crystallize the big idea, you have to think of your audience. You have to ponder what response you expect from your audience after they hear your sermon. You also have to state *what the purpose of your sermon is*. If the big idea states the truth, the sermon purpose describes in what way the truth should be accomplished.<sup>63</sup> The purpose statement forces preachers to think through what they expect to happen within their hearers as a result of hearing the sermon. The sermon purpose compels the preacher to reflect on how attitudes and behavior should

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<sup>63</sup> For further study on the sermon purpose, see Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 107-12.

be altered.<sup>64</sup> That in turn will enable him to be more concrete in his application of truth to life. After all, if a sermon accomplishes anything, it must accomplish something.

What, then, is the difference between big idea and purpose? Steven Mathewson has an analogy of the arrow and target to describe it.<sup>65</sup> If the sermon's big idea resembles an arrow, the sermon's purpose resembles the target. Look at the picture below:



Figure 1. The big idea and sermon purpose

After you have the arrow in your hand, you have to decide on your target. The target is your sermon purpose.

*First*, an effective miracle sermon purpose states the purpose of the preacher that reflects the Gospel author's purpose. How then does an expositor determine the purpose of his sermon? He does so by discovering the purpose behind the passage he is preaching. As part of his exegesis, he should ask, "Why did the author write this? What effect did he expect it to have on his readers?" No biblical writer took up his pen to jot down "a few appropriate remarks" on a religious subject. Each wrote to affect lives.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 111.

<sup>65</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 108.

<sup>66</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 108.

In addition, the authors of the gospels have purposes in writing their Gospel. John states his purpose in John 20:31: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." It means you have to stand in line with him when you read his miracle stories. However, you may not find the purpose as explicit as John has. In Matthew, you will not find the same statement formula like John. You will find it by reading his gospel wholly. His purpose is to convince Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Their purpose must be your purpose. In this area, preachers need to ask in accordance with the purpose of gospels, *what do I expect to accomplish in my hearers lives as a result hearing my sermon?*

*Second, an effective miracle sermons purpose has measurable results.* The gospels authors have a purpose for their readers and you must be in the line with them. The problem is how do you know the purpose has been achieved in your audience? Steven Mathewson says: "The purpose of your sermon can be different than the author's purpose as long as it is in line with the author's purpose. Sometimes the composition of your audience dictates this . . . When moving from the author's intended purpose to your sermon's purpose, you can move from apples to oranges because you are still talking about fruit. Moving from apples to baseball is too large a stretch, even though both objects are roughly the same shape and size."<sup>67</sup> It's about moving from the abstract to the concrete and measurable purpose.

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<sup>67</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 109.

Stating the sermon's purpose as instructional objective gives the preacher a means of gauging the sermon's effectiveness. This requires stating the purpose in measurable terms.<sup>68</sup> In Mark 1:21-31, the writer's purpose is to show the audience that Jesus has authority over the universe because he is the Son of God. You may state the sermon purpose like this: *My audience will worship Jesus as the Son of God.* Nothing is doctrinally and theologically wrong with this purpose. The problem is in what way your audience worships Jesus as the Son of God. This sermon purpose cannot be measured. Haddon Robinson says: "A purpose statement not only describes our destination and the route we will follow to get there, but, if possible, tells how we can know if we have arrived. If we are not clear about where we are going, we will probably land someplace else."<sup>69</sup> To achieve what he says, the sermon purpose must be stated in specific, concrete and measurable ways. Here are some measurable sermons purposes:

- My audience will make commitment to read the bible daily to know their God deeply.
- My audience will pray before going to work in surrender to Jesus as their God.
- My audience should be able to mention at least one way they obey to Jesus as the Son of God.

*Third, an effective miracle sermons purpose should be Christological.* Like the Christological idea, you should also have a Christological sermon purpose. If the general sermon purpose is what you expect to happen in your hearers after they hear your sermon, then a Christological sermon purpose is more specific. A Christological sermon

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<sup>68</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 109.

<sup>69</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 109.

purpose states what you expect to happen in your hearers after they hear and know who Jesus is. What kind of response I wish my audience should show after they hear my miracle story sermon.

The formula of a Christological sermon purpose is:

After my audience knows Jesus <u>      (1)      </u> , they will <u>      (2)      </u>
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Figure 2. The formula of Christological sermon purpose

In (1), fill it with *who Jesus is, what He did, what He has*, etc. It's about the person or the works of Christ.

In (2), fill it with the response you are expecting from your audience.

In Mark 1:21-31, the writer's purpose is to show the audience that Jesus has authority over the universe because he is the Son of God. *After my audience knows Jesus has authority and power over the universe, they will pray before going to work in order to surrender to him.* In this purpose, you will find the purpose of Mark, the measurable purpose and Christological purpose. You may not ask your people personally, "have you done it or not yet?" However, the sermon purpose will help you to tell your people to do the sermon in their lives relevantly. Indeed, you must have an accurate interpretation of the text but you also must know how to land your message to your audience accurately. The sermon purpose will show you the way to accomplish it.

### **The Frame and the Walls**

The next step in preparing the miracle story sermon is outlining and filling your sermon with supported materials. Like building a house, after you build a strong foundation, you are ready to build the frame upon the foundation and add the walls to

the frame. In this chapter, you will learn how to make an effective outline for your sermon. However, preaching is about not only the bible, but also the people. Therefore, you will also learn how to make and choose the relevance outline for your listeners.

After you build your outline, your task is how to fill your outline and what kind of materials will support your sermon properly. You will learn not only to put biblical materials in, but also relevance materials. In this stage, the wall of the house is built and the sermon is almost complete. You will complete it in the last stage. You will learn how to give a good entrance and exit for the sermon.

### The Outline

According to Haddon Robinson, the outline has four purposes: "First, it clarifies in the speaker's eye and minds the relationships between the parts of a sermon. Second, the speaker views his sermon as a whole and thereby heightens his sense of unity. An outline also crystallizes the order of ideas so that the listener will be given them in the appropriate sequence. Finally, the preacher recognizes the places in the outline requiring additional supporting material to develop his points."<sup>70</sup>

Usually, there are two basic structures of sermon: deductive and inductive. There is a simple difference between these outlines. The deductive you state the answer at the beginning of your sermon and raise the questions in your listeners' mind.

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<sup>70</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 132.

The inductive you raise the question and you answer it at the end of your sermon.<sup>71</sup>

Greidanus differs these structures: the deductive state the general point, then particularize it (deduction) and the inductive present particulars first; state the point last (induction).<sup>72</sup>

### Deductive Pattern

The main characteristic of this pattern is the big idea emerges in the sermon introduction or at the first main point and body of the sermon explains, proves or applies it. This structure "aids the understanding of the hearers since they told the destination of the trip at the beginning and thus better are better able to follow the road that leads to that destination."<sup>73</sup>

In this pattern, after the big idea is stated, the body of the sermon is the list that supported the big idea or sub-principles that express the dominant idea of the message as a whole. Visually this pattern looks like this:

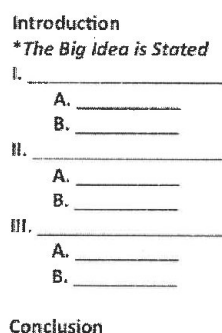


Figure 3. The deductive pattern

<sup>71</sup> Donald R. Sunukjian, "The Preacher and the Message" (class lectures, Doctor of Ministry class of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, May 18, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 143.

<sup>73</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 143.

In deductive form, the story of Jesus raises Jairus' daughter can be outlined:

### Introduction

Put your trust in Jesus who has power over life and death (the big idea)

#### I. Man is the creature who has limited power

A. The people in the story don't have any power to help the widow

B. You have only limited power to little aspects of life.

#### II. God is the Creator who has unlimited power

A. Jesus comes and raises the son

B. He has the power because he is the truly God

#### III. Come to him and surrender your life totally to him

### Conclusion

In this outline, the big idea is Jesus has the authority over life and death. The main point

I states the big idea and the main point II shows the response should be shown by believers.

### Advantages and Challenges of This Pattern

The most advantage of this pattern is your listeners do not need to wait for a long time to know what you want to say and it will help you in the clarity. Your listeners just need to hold the big idea and they will follow and understand your sermon easily until the end of your sermon. If your listeners lose some part of your sermon, it is easier for them to reconnect to the sermon as long as they remember the big idea. You just need to restate your big idea when you move from a point to the next point.

There are some challenges in this pattern. First, you have to make sure that your listeners have interest in your points. Sunukjian says, "The potential drawback of the deductive pattern is that there's no longer any suspense, or tension, or movement toward the climax of the message."<sup>74</sup> It is easier to lose your audience than have them until the sermon ends. Second, you have to keep in your mind that the big idea should be restated. Contrast with the inductive that the listeners will arrive at the idea on their own; the preachers need to state the big idea to the listeners.

### Inductive Pattern

The main characteristic of this pattern is contrast with the deductive. The big idea emerges at the end of sermon and the points are the series of ideas or principles that shape the main principle or idea. Visually this pattern looks like this:

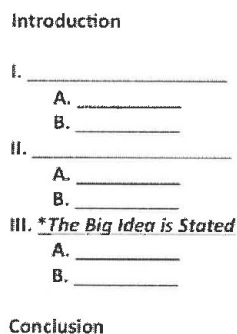


Figure 4. The inductive pattern

Below is the inductive pattern of Jesus calms the storms in Mark 4:35-41 by Don Sunukjian:<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 149.

<sup>75</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 39-40.

## Introduction

- I. The disciples obey Jesus and find themselves in a life-threatening storm that fills them with despair (4:35-38)
- II. The reason such things happen may be that Satan is attempting to prevent God's purpose
  - A. The storm is Satan's attempt to prevent the growth of the kingdom
  - B. Our difficulties may be Satan's attempt to prevent what God wants to do through us
- III. When obedience leads to difficulty, resist Satan's efforts and trust God's power
  - A. Jesus rebukes the demonic activity behind the storm and encourages the disciples to trust God's power (4:39-41)
  - B. We should resist Satan's efforts and trust God's power.

## Conclusion

### Advantages and Challenges of This Pattern

The major advantage of inductive structure than deductive structure is that "inductive sermon produce a sense of discovery in listeners, as though they arrived at the idea on their own."<sup>76</sup> Due to the big idea being revealed at the end of sermon, the most challenging is you must work hard to keep your audience with you. During the journey to the end, you must have the things that interest the listeners to hear you.

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<sup>76</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 127.

This pattern fits with people who like stories. Inductive patterns will emerge a sense of discovery in them. The listeners feel like reading Sherlock Holmes and waiting eagerly until the sermon ends to know the hidden mysteries. The climax that is in the end of the sermon is the most waiting moment because the preacher will reveal what is the big idea or the main message of the story.

The challenge of this pattern that your listeners must have a good concentration to follow your story until the big idea is revealed at the end of the sermon. In this case, the preacher needs more effort to have the listeners with them. Once they lose a part of the story, they have to reconnect to the point where they lost the point and get back to you.

### **Don Sunukjian's Relevancy Pattern**

The relevancy side of the sermon must be shown in the sermon structure.<sup>77</sup> Don Sunukjian shows three relevancy-structured patterns in structuring sermons. The first pattern is relevancy at the end. This pattern develops the biblical passage in its entirety. Then draw out the contemporary connections of the single Take Home Truth to various groups in your audience or to various situations they face.

Introduction

I. Passage

II. Relevancy

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<sup>77</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 161-81.

## Conclusion<sup>78</sup>

The second pattern is relevancy interspersed. This pattern unfolds one segment of the biblical passage, and shows the contemporary connection. Preachers unfold another segment of the biblical passage, and then carry forward the contemporary connections in a similar way.

### Introduction

#### I. A. Passage

#### B. Relevancy

#### II. A. Passage

#### B. Relevancy

### Conclusion

The third pattern is relevancy wrapped. This pattern probes at length the contemporary connection of the first passage unit, even though the listeners are as yet unaware of the passage. In using this pattern, the preacher demonstrates in the first main point that the same situation exists in the biblical world. When unfolding the second main point, first in terms of the text and then in terms of the contemporary application. Below is the pattern:

Introduction – contemporary (Here's what's going on in our lives)

I. Passage problem (The same thing was going on in the biblical world)

II. Passage solution (Here's how they dealt with it)

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<sup>78</sup> Or it can be like this:

- Introduction
- I. Passage Explanation
- II. Passage Explanation
- Conclusion – Relevancy

Conclusion – contemporary (We’re going to deal with it the same way).

You can combine all these patterns with deductive and inductive approach.

## The Body

### **Retell and Relive the Story**

Imagine three men standing before you. The first man comes from first century AD. They are the gospel writers. The second man is a theologian from middle age. The last man is a contemporary theologian from our times. These men would tell you about the event where Jesus feeds the five thousand. Whose story would be the most interesting for you?

I think the story of the first man is the most interesting. Why? Because they saw with their own eyes and they try to help you to see and understand the story as they see and understand the story. They will tell you about their manner, custom, culture, even how they think. You will enjoy their story and you will feel the time has run so fast. You really enjoy it because you have many interesting pictures that you didn’t have before. There are interesting pictures that appear in your mind every time they describe the details of the event.

Of course, it’s impossible to present the gospel writers physically in our times. However, there is a way that will help you and the listeners to have the pictures of first century AD. You need help from imagination. It’s a helpful tool that usually neglected.

What pictures do you have in mind when you read the story Jesus and his group meet the group of funeral procession in Nain? Look at the description of Tom Wright below:

Then, quite suddenly, some strangers arrive. A man leading a small group of followers. He seems vaguely familiar: Upper Galilee isn't such a large place, and perhaps he grew up in a neighboring village (Nain is about five miles south-east of Nazareth). He is looking at the widowed and now doubly bereaved mother, and something inside him seems to be stirring. He comes up and says something to her – and then, to everyone's surprise and horror, he touches the bier. (Nobody would normally do that except the official bearers; touching a corpse or the bier, or even the bearers themselves, would make you unclean.) Then – the biggest shock of all – he's telling the lad to get up . . . and he's getting up. The whole funeral procession goes wild with astonishment, delight, disbelief.

They don't know which one to look at, the no-longer-dead boy, his amazed and ecstatic mother, or this stranger who has done what old prophets, Elijah and Elisha, used to do. (Luke has told the story with deliberate echoes of 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4.) 'God has visited his people,' they say: not in the sense of paying them a social visit, but in the old biblical sense, where this phrase was used to refer to God 'visiting' Israel at the time of the Exodus and other great events. It means, 'God has come near to us, to save and rescue us.' It means, 'This is the time we've been waiting for.'<sup>79</sup>

In this part, Wright paints the pictures in the readers' mind and brings the pictures to the theological meaning of the story. I think there is no reason for us to judge his details and imagination is not biblical.

Imagination will help you to present the story as close as possible to the gospel writer's viewpoint and the audience will see the story as the writers want the original readers to see. Imagination is not just retelling the story but relive it. When the story relives in your audience's mind, it's the most effective story they've ever heard. When you relive the story, your audience will follow you and get your idea without being

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<sup>79</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 83-4.

stated directly. Imagination will help you to relive the story. Imagination is not an enemy but a friend.

### **Explanation**

There's a two thousand year gap between the biblical and contemporary world. There are differences in manner, customs, culture, thought and even theological terms. In the body of the sermon, you have to explain it to help your listeners get the proper meaning. Remember, our task as preachers is to get across the original meaning of the text as accurate as possible to the contemporary listeners.

For instance, you preach the story of a Syro-Phoenician whose daughter was suffering from demon possession, who comes to Jesus. What is the meaning of her dialog with Jesus, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." What does Jesus mean by saying that statement? Of course, you can detect that Jesus and she speak in a parabolic way. Why does Jesus use dog in their sentence? Did he intend to humiliate the woman who comes from a different nation?

Sometimes you have to explain the meaning of the word or sentence theologically. For example, Don Sunukjian gives a theological explanation of Jesus' words in Mark 6:45-56:

And then he takes God's name. When they cry out in fear, he says, "Don't be afraid. It is I"—which in the Greek language is "I am"—the very name of God, "I AM."

God has a name. His name is not God—that's what he is, he's God. God [deity] simply means deity. But God has a name.

Just like I might say, “He’s a worship leader,” that’s what he is. But he has a name to distinguish him from other worship leaders—his name is Daniel.

The same is true of God. He has a name to distinguish him from other gods. And whenever [LORD] you see the word LORD in your Bible, with all capital letters, that’s calling God by his name.

In English, God’s name is written as LORD, but in the Hebrew language, his [YAHWEH] name is YAHWEH, and [I AM] YAHWEH means I AM.<sup>80</sup>

When he explains the meaning of what Jesus said theologically, the listeners will understand who Jesus really is in the story and today. In this way, the listeners will get the meaning of what the gospel writers want to say.

What is the criterion of a good explanation? The test of a good explanation is your audience. In composing your explanation, you have to make sure that there is no question at all in your mind about your explanation. Then, you have to sit at the seat of your audience and answer the question, “Shall my listeners understand this explanation?” The explanation is made for your audience and you have to make sure that they understand your explanation easily and correctly.

## **Illustration**

Good preachers use illustrations in his/her sermon. Illustration is not to make the sermon longer or to entertain the audience. Illustration is not a supplement but a crucial part in a sermon. Illustrations make speech effective. For the significance of illustration, George Sweazey lists eleven reasons illustration are indispensable for sermons.<sup>81</sup> “Illustrating is an attempt to move verbally from the top of the ladder, the

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<sup>80</sup> Donald R. Sunukjian, e-mail message to author, October 26, 2010.

<sup>81</sup> George Sweazey, *Preaching the Good News* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), 193-5.

realm of abstraction, down to the level of the particular and familiar. . . . The goal of illustrating is to move the theological abstraction down to a familiar level.”<sup>82</sup>

Illustrations help preachers to get across concepts from one world – the biblical world – connect to the other world – the contemporary world.

The purpose of illustration is to illustrate. Illustration must have a connection to an object and it is consistent with the root word, *illustrate*, “to shed light upon” or “to illumine.” If an illustration illustrates nothing, it is not illustration at all. It’s just a story, quotation, or data. They become illustration if they have connection with the object you want to illustrate.

An illustration is sometimes designed to accomplish more than one purpose, but the essential purpose of an illustration falls into one of three categories: explanation, validation, or application. Illustration purpose to:<sup>83</sup>

Table 2. The categories of illustration

<b>Explain</b>	<b>Validate</b>	<b>Apply</b>
Objective: Understanding	Objective: Agreement	Objective: Obedience
Expand	Gain Agreement	Provide a “How To”
Clarify	Prove	Show the Significance
Elucidate	Show as Realistic	Make the Impact Felt
Simplify	Make Believable	Touch a Need
Specify	Convince	Relate Truth to Experience
		Show the Truth in Action

Illustration is a tool to explain the object. Its function is to help your listeners understand the concept you communicate. Illustration makes your concept become

<sup>82</sup> Michael J. Hostetler, *Illustrating the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 12-3.

<sup>83</sup> Keith Willhite, *Preaching with Relevance without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 104-5.

clear for your listeners. It helps you to move from an abstraction level to the specific one.

Illustration also helps you to validate your argument or idea. Of course, illustrations or examples are different logically with argument or idea, “but psychologically they work with argument to gain acceptance.”<sup>84</sup> Illustration will work psychologically to show it realistic and believable. Look at the examples below:

A television program preceding the 1988 Winter Olympics featured blind skiers being trained for slalom skiing, impossible as that sounds. Paired with sighted skiers, the blind skiers were taught on the flats how to make right and left turns. When that was mastered, they were taken to the slalom slope, where their sighted partners skied beside them shouting, “Left!” and “Right!” As they obeyed the commands, they were able to negotiate the course and cross the finish line, depending solely on the sighted skiers’ word. It was either complete trust or catastrophe.

What a vivid picture of the Christian life! In this world, we are in reality blind about what course to take. We must rely solely on the Word of the only One who is truly sighted--God Himself. His Word gives us the direction we need to finish the course.<sup>85</sup>

Illustration also helps you to apply your main concept or idea. It means illustration help preachers to show to his listeners “how to do it” the idea(s) in daily lives. Darrell C. Bock, in his commentary on Luke, uses a personal life experience to apply the concept of how to respond to Jesus’ command:

In his willingness to cast out the nets, Peter responds solely on the basis of Jesus’ word (v. 5). His professional training told him that there was no chance for a successful catch, but Peter apparently knew enough about Jesus that the latter’s insight might just exceed his own. This willingness to follow where Jesus leads may occasionally go against the grain of culture, custom, or common wisdom. Sometimes God takes us in surprising places in surprising ways to stretch us.

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<sup>84</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 152.

<sup>85</sup> <http://bible.org/illustration/word-gives-us-direction> (Accessed December 28, 2010).

Several years ago I took a sabbatical leave in Germany. No one worried about me or my wife, but the standard question was, "What will you do about the kids?" Behind their question was the view that no one should take children of eight, seven, and five years and throw them into a fresh culture so early in their education, even if God calls us there for a time. Our position was different. God had called us to Germany, in part to experience Germany. So we did not look for an English-speaking school. We trusted that God would care for us in a new context. I make this point not to say that everyone who travels overseas should make such a cultural commitment, but to say we felt God was directing us in this decision.

It was amazing how God provided. At the little elementary school in a town of five thousand people where we lived, there was a second language class, so my children attended school not only with German children, but also with children from eight other countries — all learning German starting from the same place. We came during a time when refugees were flooding in from Eastern Europe. These classes were a new venture for this community. My middle daughter walked into a class that had a child from a bilingual family — the mother was from England and the father from Germany. Her teacher was the only one that our children had who did not know any English! But God provided a built-in translator, an eight-year-old bilingual child, who could get things started until my daughter could make it on her own. My older daughter, on the other hand, had to fend for herself. God did not provide in the same way for each child, yet he cared for both of them. In sum, God cared for us in different ways, as we went where he led, fully committed (well, mostly so) to trusting him. As a result of the experience, which was not easy but which taught us much about faith, my children have developed a fascination for people of different cultural backgrounds, something that will benefit them as they serve God in the future.<sup>86</sup>

From his illustration, he wants his readers to know "this is the concrete ways how to do the concept in daily lives." His experience shows what the message looks like in their real life.

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<sup>86</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 163-4.

Perhaps, the most frequent asked question on illustration is which illustration is the best one? Haddon Robinson uses the picture below to describe the most powerful illustration<sup>87</sup>

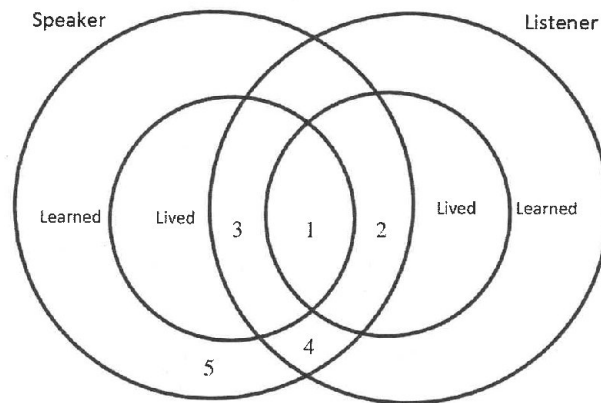


Figure 5. The circles of illustration

1. The speaker's and listener's lived experience overlap
2. The speaker's learned experience overlaps the listener's lived experience
3. The speaker's lived experience overlaps the listener's learned experience
4. The speaker's learned experience overlaps the listener's learned experience
5. The speaker's lived or learned experience does not overlaps the listener's lived or learned experience

The most powerful illustrations come from your personal experience overlaps with your listeners' personal experience. Your personal experience would become your guide on how to say it and minimize resistance from your listeners. They will identify themselves to you because of the same interest. When you use illustrations from

<sup>87</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 156.

number one, your listeners feel you are not a judge, but a friend. They will open their heart to the truth though you don't ask them verbally.

### **Application**

Sometimes, people feel the sermon doesn't connect to their daily lives. They feel the sermon is not about them, but the preachers. They think and feel it because they don't have image of what the message looks like in their real life and they don't know how to do it. They have the concept of the truth that unrelated to daily lives while God's word command them to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22; ESV).

Sermon is not just about biblical truth but also apply and how to do the truth in daily lives. Preachers should explain the meaning of the text biblically and theologically, however they also should apply it to their contemporary lives. They have to show what the message looks like in their real life. Warren Wiersbe often uses the phrase "The human mind is not . . . a debating hall, but a picture gallery."<sup>88</sup> You have to give examples how to do it. Through the examples, the listeners know the image of what the message looks like and how to do it.

There are two things that should be considered in making effective application: know your audience and proper imagination in what ways this truth looks alike in their

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<sup>88</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination: The Quest for Biblical Ministry* (Wheaton: Victor, 1994), 24.

lives. Haddon Robinson integrates these things in developing application that connect to the audience:

We tend to apply a passage to people like ourselves. If you're 35 and you associate with young professionals in the church, you'll tend to keep those people in mind. It's helpful to make a grid of the people in your church in terms of things like age, marital status, housing situation, net worth, education. After you determine the principle in a passage, you look at the grid and ask, "What does this say to a single person in her fifties who works in a grocery store and lives with her parents?" It may not say anything, but you continue asking that question for each grouping. When I prepare, I imagine about eight people standing around my desk. One is my wife's mother, who is a true believer. In my mind, I also picture a friend who is a cynic, and sometimes I can hear him saying, "Oh, yeah, sure" I picture a business executive who thinks bottom line. I have in my mind a teenager, whom I can occasionally hear saying, "This is boring." I look at these folks in my mind and think, *what does this have to say to them?*<sup>89</sup>

Application is made for listeners to do in their daily lives.

Ramesh Richard suggests five arenas of life where truth must apply (so what?) and be specified (now what?). Think through these five arenas in developing your application to discover how's God's truth will make a difference and how it will call his people to obedience. Preachers should answer *What kind of a person does God wants them to become in: (1) Personal Life, (2) Home life, (3) Work or study of life, (4) Church life, and (5) Community Life.*<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, "The Heresy of Application." *Leadership Journal* 18 (Fall 1997): 26.

<sup>90</sup> Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermon: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 117.

## Introduction and Conclusion

### Introduction

When I am in the airplane, I'm always waiting for the most crucial moment in the flight. Yes, you are right, the take off moment. It's the crucial moment. You will have a good flight if your plane has the good take-off. You will have a bad flight, though just a few moments, if your plane has the bad take-off.

Like the crucial take-off moment of the airplane, introduction is the crucial moment for a sermon. Your audience will enjoy the good flight in your sermon if you have the good introduction. Like the take-off moment that takes a few minutes, the introduction also take the same. However, this small piece has great influence to the big piece of the sermon. To describe the significance of the introduction, Haddon Robinson said, "If you do not capture attention in first thirty seconds, you may never gain it at all."<sup>91</sup> It's right. An old saying said, "You never have a second chance to make a first impression."

The effective introduction has GRIP characteristics. **G**et attention of the audience is the first task when preachers stand on the pulpit. What is the most effective way to get their attention? It's not the ancient or biblical world, but the contemporary and modern one. They have no interest with five loaves and two fishes story, but to the last episode of Harry Potter. You have to use the secular materials to get their attention at the beginning and bring them to the truth for the next. Michael Hostetler used this

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<sup>91</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 167.

heading for the chapter of his book, "Start with the Secular." Using this way will help us to make a life-related contact point.<sup>92</sup>

As preachers, we must remember that preaching is talking to people about themselves from the bible rather than talking to people about the bible. This philosophy must be seen at the beginning of the sermon. You have to raise the needs. In the introduction, you have to show the audience why they should listen to you. If they have to listen to you, they have a reason. They will listen to you because you talk about their problem. Haddon Robinson says, "Early in the sermon, therefore, listeners should realize that the pastor is talking to them about themselves. . . . Contrary to the traditional approach to homiletics, which holds the application until the conclusion, application starts in the introduction. Should a preacher of even limited ability bring to the surface people's questions, problems, hurts, and desires to deal with them from the Bible, they will bring the grace of God to bear on the agonizing worries and tensions of daily life."<sup>93</sup> Begin your sermon with their interest and needs and they will hear you.

Third, an effective introduction Introduce the body of the sermon. As its function to introduce, the introduction should orient the listeners to the body of the sermon. For example, Don Sunukjian has a great introduction in his sermon "Said=Done, Word=Deed" (Mark 1:21-28). In this sermon, he talks about who holds the authority in audience live. He begins his sermon by saying:

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<sup>92</sup> Michael J. Hostetler, *Introducing the Sermon: The Art of Compelling Beginnings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 27.

<sup>93</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 171.

Babe Ruth was the great home run hitter for the New York Yankees baseball team. Once when Ruth was batting, the home plate umpire, whose name was Babe Pinelli called him out on strikes. There was sort of a stunned silence in the stands. Ruth turned to Pinelli and said, "There are 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball." Pinelli replied, "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts."

We live in a world of thousands of opinions. Whose opinion counts? Who has the authority that matters?

His introduction is about Babe Ruth, American Baseball legend. He begins with his listeners' lives and it gets attention. His introduction is about his audience and raises the needs of the listeners. Maybe, the listeners say in their mind, "OK, what's next? I'm waiting." The listeners already with him and then, he orients them to the body of the sermon with the sentences, "We live in a world of thousands of opinions. Whose opinion counts? Who has the authority that matters?"

Finally, an effective introduction is on the **Personal** side of listeners. When you preach about Jesus is the resurrection and the life, you may talk about the tragedy of Michael Jackson. It gets their attentions. They will hear you. However, the strongest introduction is about the personal side of your listeners. You may say in your introduction about their destination after death, "From MJ, we learn that the death could come at anytime. Nobody can predict the coming of the death. Death is unpredictable. Nothing we can do to change the nature of death. However, it's not the truly matter. The matter is not you can predict it or not but where you are going to beyond the death. You may invest many things for your future in this world, but you may leave it away when you die. You have to know where you are going to beyond the grave." In this way, your listeners will listen to you because you talk about their life. They put their attention more on the temporary life than eternally. They may have

some response in their heart because of your introduction, but they will hear you because you begin with their personal side.

There are two common mistakes in this stage. First, preachers do apologize to his audience. Consider these statements that are usually spoken from the pulpit:

- "I got a late start on this sermon, so it's not going to be very good..."
- "Sorry about my poor English..."
- "The dog ate my first sermon manuscript, so I've had to do it over..."

To apologize in the pulpit is not about your humbleness. When you stand on the pulpit, you are selling something and your audiences are the buyers who are considering to buying what you sell or not. Apologizing shows that what you sell is not the number one quality. Indeed you don't have a bad intention with your apology but the apology weakens your message.

You also may not review the last sermon as the introduction of your current sermon. The audience may hear these sentences from the pulpit, "Last week we had Matthew 3 . . . This morning we're going to . . ." or "You heard the sermon about Jesus raising the dead last week and today you will hear the sermon about . . ." You may have a good sermon last week, it doesn't mean your audience will hear you again automatically. It's not an effective way to introduce the sermon because you don't begin it with your audience interest. They have no reason why they should listen to you because you are not on their side.

Haddon Robinson said, "There are three types of preachers: those to whom you cannot listen; those to whom you can listen; and those to whom you must listen. During

the introduction the congregation usually decides the kind of speaker addressing them that morning.”<sup>94</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If the sermon introduction can be analogized to the take-off moment of an aircraft, then the conclusion of the sermon is also analogized to the same thing. An aircraft will not stay forever in the sky and, sooner or later, a plane should land at its destination.

A sermon could have a special exposition trip, even the successful take-off, but the sermons did not achieve its goals if the landing process is not good. At this moment, the audience will land on the runway and take home the essence of the sermon and what they should do to realize the truth.

At this moment, a preacher will conclude what he had. We may state our big idea in the body of the sermon but it doesn't mean the audience will take it until the end of the sermon. Conclusions will give us the chance to state our sermon truth secondly. The preacher will get help to do it from his big idea. The more clear his big idea, the more clearly the conclusion that the audience takes home. There is no good conclusion without a clear big idea.

The second purpose of the conclusion is to command the audience that what they hear is what they should do after the sermon. Let's imagine once again, your audience doesn't hear your sermon since the beginning and he waits will from the

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<sup>94</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 175.

moment you end your sermon. The conclusion moment is your last chance to state the ultimate truth. In this stage, preachers have to convey what the Scriptures command to the audience to do. The conclusion is the most relevance part in the whole sermon.

There are many suggestions to conclude the sermons. You can use the last illustration for your big idea, the poem or hymn, the quotation, the story, etc. I agree that all are good ways to conclude the sermon. However, whatever the ways, it must have EXITS characteristics.

First, a good sermon conclusion will exhort the audience to do the message. In the conclusion, you have to exhort the listeners to do what they have listened. The conclusion is the last chance for you to force your audience to do the message. You may details the list what-to-do, but you also have to exhort them to do the message.

Second, at the conclusion, preachers should instruct and tell his listeners how to do this message in daily lives. Like applications, you let them know how to do the sermon in concrete ways. You may have some application in the sermon body, but how-to-do-it in the conclusion is the most remembered by the listeners. In other words, conclusion is the last and ultimate application of the sermon.

Third, a good conclusion is a Summary of the sermon. In the conclusion, you tell to your listeners that the sermon is complete. In sermon body, you explain each point of your subject, and your conclusion paragraph wraps all those points back into the subject. Your listeners may forget the body of your sermon, but remember conclusion is our last chance to tell the truth and how to do it.

If the introduction has its “common mistakes,” the conclusion also has it. The first common mistake in conclusion is the preacher doesn’t EXIT his sermon, but asks God to do it. The preacher usually says the sentences below:

- “May God help you to apply his word in your daily lives.”
- “May the Holy Spirit stamps his word forever in your heart.”
- “May you become a good listener and Christian in your lives.”

This is the most classical improper way to conclude the sermon. It looks like this statement has spiritual nuance and rely on God’s help but it could be the preacher has no responsibility to his message. Nothing is wrong with these sentences. The problem is how we can do his word that had been preached in a concrete action today. Karl Barth says, “Two things call for emphasis. ‘First, God is the one who works, and second, we humans must try to point to what is said in Scripture. There is no third thing.’”<sup>95</sup>

Preachers also must be careful that they do not introduce new materials in their sermon. Conclusion depends on the body of the sermon. We conclude the sermon based on what we say in the sermon body. If the preacher introduces new material in this section, the listeners will not have enough reason to do your sermon. Introduce new materials in the conclusion would demolish a beautiful house that you have built.

You also don’t need to announce, “Now, the conclusion is . . .” Announcing the conclusion will lead your listeners into temptation: be an analyst or reviewer, not a good listener. The announcement “calls their attention to the mechanical skills of

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<sup>95</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 45.

constructing a message, and it makes them refer to their watches to see how long you've spoken."<sup>96</sup>

Last, the audience must hear what to do after hearing the sermon, not hearing the introspective questions. Introspective questions ask the audience to examine themselves and answer the questions from the preachers as below:

- Lets you examine yourself, 'Do you always put yourselves under the authority of Jesus as your Lord?'
- Have you already been a good disciple or a bad one?
- Will you trust your life to the Christ as the Lord of the universe?

Remember, the conclusion is the stage to exhort, instruct and tell to your audience what they should do after they hear your sermon. It's not the time to contemplate or examine themselves. It's time to apply what they hear from you in their daily lives.

### **Preaching in An Image-Dominated Culture**

It is not enough to know how to compose a good and accurate miracle story sermon. You also have to think how to get across the message accurately to the contemporary audience. Haddon Robinson says, "We should forget about speaking to the ages and speak to his day. An expository preacher confronts people about themselves from the Bible instead of lecturing to them from the Bible about history or

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<sup>96</sup> Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 250.

archaeology.”<sup>97</sup> To preach about them, you have to know who their audience is and how is they think.

There is a fact that every preacher should ponder to preach in this day: *we think in pictures even though we speak and write with words.*<sup>98</sup> When I say to you “On a clear winter's day, a snow covered Mount Fuji glitters on the horizon like a mirage of some unattainable snowboarding nirvana. Mount Fuji covered in snow with a bullet train or cherry blossoms in the foreground.” What do you have in your mind after you hear or read these sentences? I think what you have in your mind is not a row of words or sentences. There is an image of a mount that is covered by snows on the top. There is white color in your mind when you describe the snow or the blue for the sky. You also may think some trees around the mount with snow on its branch. How do you do when I'm not saying these things to you? That's how we think. We think in pictures and images. Warren W. Wiersbe says, “People think in pictures and respond to truth with their hearts as well as their heads.”<sup>99</sup>

When you preach the word of God, you also need to think how to create the images or pictures in your audience's mind. Whether you preach to the people with west or east culture background, you preach to the people who think in pictures and images. The following suggestions will help you in preaching to the people in an image cultures.

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<sup>97</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 175.

<sup>98</sup> Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, 23.

<sup>99</sup> Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, 23.

## Using Words

When you preach to the people, you communicate concepts that are formed by the compounding words. The people who hear you will get the concept and make a picture in their mind based on the concept. The kind of picture in their mind depends on the words that shape the concept you deliver. Below is a picture of simple communication process:



Figure 6. Simple communication process

In this picture, you can see that everybody has image in his/her mind. When you try to communicate it, it shall be encoded verbally into the words. Your partner hears you and decodes your concept and words into his/her image. In this process, the matter is not on what kind of image you want to communicate. The matter is how you choose the right word to shape the concept as similar as the image you have in your mind.

For example you preach Jesus raises Jairus' daughter. You may say that Jairus has a daughter and she died. After that you are going to the theological analysis of the story and so on. You succeed in getting the theological meaning of the story across, but your listeners don't have the images, or a few images, of the story in their mind.

However, look at How William Barclay describe the situation of Jairus:

Here is the pathos of life suddenly turned to gladness. Very keenly Luke felt the tragedy of this girl's death. There were three things which made it so poignant.

- # (a) She was an only child. Only Luke tells us that. The light of her parents' life had gone out.
- # (b) She was about twelve years of age. That is to say she was just at the dawn of womanhood because children in the East develop much more quickly than in

the West. She could even have been contemplating marriage at that age. What should have been the morning of life had become the night.

# (c) Jairus was the president of the synagogue. That is to say, he was the man who was responsible for the administration of the synagogue and the ordering of public worship. He had reached the highest post that life could give him in the respect of his fellow-men. No doubt he was well to do; no doubt he had climbed the ladder of earthly ambition and prestige. It seemed as if life--as it sometimes does--had given lavishly of many things but was about to take the most precious thing away. All the pathos of life is in the background of this story.<sup>100</sup>

What images do you have in your mind after you read Barclay's description?

Barclay describes how difficult the situation is that Jairus has. Barclay describes how important the presence of a child in the society at that time. When she gets ready for marriage, she dies. For Jairus, the death of his daughter is the same with he loses his future. Barclay adds his description with who is Jairus in the society at that time. He is the president of the synagogue. He has the highest post that life could give him in respect of his fellow-men. In this condition, however, he couldn't do anything for his daughter. He has a good status, position and power but he is powerless in that situation. The audience has images that there is no hope for Jairus until this point.

The coming of Jesus is the same with hope. When he has no power over death, the man who has the power over death comes to him. Barclay creates no hope images in the audience's man. His description also gives a very contrast image when Jesus comes to Jairus. At least, audiences will have the images of hopeless hopeful situation by his description.

Image is not only helping listeners to have pictures in their mind. When preachers succeed in creating images in the listeners' mind, it will be easier for listeners

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<sup>100</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*, 131.

to accept his message. If the images will attach strongly in their mind, as well as the preacher's message, they will do what's attached in their mind in their daily lives.

### Using Pictures

One of the most rapid technology developments occurs in the area of pictures. Actually, there is something amazing with this reality. It happens in the area that indispensable with human in history. Graham Johnston quotes Wade Clark Roof: "Perhaps the most important impact of television was that it replaced the word with the image."<sup>101</sup> The image becomes the most effective language today. No matter where you come from or what language you speak, you don't need a translator to understand the image or picture.

Preachers should have sensitivity on this phenomenon. It's not wise to make this phenomenon our new enemy. If you put the wrong label on it, your people will also do the same to you. Calvin Miller says: "Can the church become pictorial in order to live, or will it remain only audio and die?"<sup>102</sup> It is wise to use them as a mean to deliver the truth to your people.

The PowerPoint is one of the ways to help you create the image in your people's mind. The slides will help your audience to get the image how many people in this event. However, the pictures of the first century and twenty first century could be a

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<sup>101</sup> Graham M. Johnston, *Preaching to the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 164.

<sup>102</sup> Calvin Miller, *Marketplace Preaching: How to Return the Sermon to Where It Belongs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 115.

good combination to presents the story. For example, the story of Jesus turning water into wine:

- Scene 1: Slide of wedding party in modern situation
- Scene 2: Slide of anxious people
- Scene 3: Slide of gallons of water
- Scene 4: Slide of a waiter who distribute the drink
- Scene 5: Slide of a cup of wine

The purpose of this presentation is to show if this event occurs in our day, it probably would be like the pictures.

You can also use moving pictures or video clips when you preach. You can edit the movie about Jesus calming the storms and show it to your people. This video will show to your audience how the disciples panic in the boat and nobody has power to calm the storms. You may split this clip into four scenes following the story plot: 1. Jesus asks them to go, 2. The storms hit the boat, 3. Jesus calms the storm, and 4. What are the disciples say to the event. Or you may play this clip at the end of the story to help your audience to get whole pictures of the story.

### Using Perspectives

The third choice you can use is the perspective. Preachers usually preach using third-person perspective. In this perspective, you stand as the one who is out of the story. You give your perspectives on the person and the event of the story to your

audience. Your audience sees the story based on your perspective as the one at the outside.

However, it is wise to stand before your audience not only as the one who is outside but inside the story. You can give your biblical and theological analysis to the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, but also as the one who are in the story. How is Andrew's perspective who bring the boy to Jesus? How about Philip and, of course, the boy who has the breads and fishes?

First-person Narrative Sermon<sup>103</sup> is one of the effective ways to deliver the miracle stories. This sermon preaches a passage from a first-person perspective. This sermon is based on a responsible interpretation of the Bible and applies its meaning to contemporary audiences. It does this through the retelling of the scriptural account from the vantage point of a character that was part of the story.<sup>104</sup>

This way will help the audience, at least, to remember the sermon. They will remember the story because we live in a sermon story. "The men and women who sit in church on Sunday live their lives in a society dominated by story. The average person spends about twenty-seven hours each week watching television, and television is a medium of story." They accept what is taught through these mediums because it talks about their lives. They accept what is preached by first-person narrative because we say what the bible says about them in their culture.

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<sup>103</sup> I suggest two resources to this methods: Haddon W. Robinson and Torrey W. Robinson, *It's All in How You to Tell It: Preaching First-Person Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) and J. Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>104</sup> Robinson and Robinson, *It's All in How You to Tell It*, 7.

## Using Effective Delivery

The effectiveness of our sermons depends on two factors: what we say and how we say it.<sup>105</sup> It is like the two sides of a coin: indispensable and related to one another. If you focus on one side only, the coin has no value. You may have a superb miracle story sermon but without effective delivery, you will not get the message across accurately.

There are several factors that should be considered in our delivery. First, you should pay attention to the gestures and movement on the stage. How do you say the scene when Jesus commands the demon to leave out of the boy? How does your hand express it? Your listeners will see the scene of the story transformed into the twenty first century, from what you do with your body to perform them. The listeners don't only hear what you say, but also how you say it. It's hard for them to believe if what you say is not sync with how you say it. Bert Decker says, "If we believe what we are saying, we will be animated while you saying it."<sup>106</sup>

There are several things you can do to help your audience to see the scene of the story from your gestures. If you preach the demoniac in Gadara, you can use your hand to show that there are two areas in the scene. The first area in your left side is the area where the man is and the second area in your right side is the area where the cliff is. When Jesus command the demons come out and go into the pigs, your hand have to

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<sup>105</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 201.

<sup>106</sup> Bert Decker, *You've Got To Be Believed To Be Heard* (New York: St. Martin, 1992), 105.

move from the left to your right. Also, your head have to follow the movement of your hand.

You may also pay attention to the movement on the stage. It's not enough to move your hands and head, but also your feet. How often you should move from one area to others? How long you have to stand in an area before you move to others?

Below is the picture that may help you to consider your movement on the stage:<sup>107</sup>

Audience Front of Stage or Platform		
<b>Area 4</b> Cool Distress, Conflict	<b>Area 1</b> Medium Confrontational	<b>Area 3</b> Warm Intimate
<b>Area 6</b> Cold Extreme Alienation	<b>Area 2</b> Medium Distant, Aloof	<b>Area 5</b> Warm More Distant

Figure 7. Movement on the stage

The psychology of aesthetics tells us that audiences respond instinctively and uniquely to each area of the stages as marked off above. They perceive each block as relatively “strong” or “weak,” “cool” or “warm.” You can assign the scenes of your story to each area accordingly.

The six areas are numbered in order of “strength.” As a general rule, the closer you are to your audience, the stronger the impression you will make. The farther away you are, the more remote you will seem. As you face the audience, scenes played to

<sup>107</sup> Adapted from Reg Grant and John Reed, *Telling Stories to Touch the Heart: How to Use Stories to Communicate God's Truth* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990), 68-69.

your right (stage right) will tend to be warmer emotionally, while scenes played to your left (stage left) will tend to be cooler.

Second, the eye contact is a factor that you should pay attention to. There is an Indonesian quotation on the role of eye in interaction: "The eye is the window of the soul." You will know someone's inner condition by seeing their eyes and they also know how you feel towards him or her through your eyes. In preaching, the preacher and the audience build a contact with each other through the eyes. If preachers fail to build a good eye contact with the audience, they will feel the speaker's lack of interest and discomfort with them. Consequently, if you have no interest in them, they will have no interest in you. Cicero said, "Everything depends on the countenance, while the countenance itself is entirely dominated by the eye."<sup>108</sup> If you want to be heard, you have to look at your listeners.

Al Fasol gives advice on the eye contact: "There is no need to "nail" anyone with an intense gaze. Some persons will feel that you are looking directly at them, even if you are only looking in their general vicinity. Do not look over the heads of the congregation. Look directly at the people, and, without moving too rapidly, establish eye contact with most if not all of them."<sup>109</sup>

Third, your voice is also important in creating images in your audience's mind. In preaching, there is a voice variety from your mouth. This variety is created through changing pitch, volume, and rate, stressing certain words, and using pauses. These

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<sup>108</sup> As quoted by Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *The Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermon* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 324.

<sup>109</sup> Al Fasol, *A Complete Guide to Sermon Delivery* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 76.

variety and contrasts show and highlight the emotional meaning of your message and support your delivery. “Generally, speeding up your rate, raising your pitch, or increasing your volume reinforces emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, excitement, anticipation, and a sense of urgency of fear. Slowing down your rate, lowering your pitch, or decreasing your volume can communicate resolution, peacefulness, remorse, disgust, or sadness.”<sup>110</sup>

In preaching, you also should know to pause. Pause is a period of silence between words and phrases and serves to separate ideas or hold attention. Pause is not just stop to speaking, but as Rudyard Kipling said, “By your silence you shall speak.”<sup>111</sup> Pause will underline the important sentence you said before and it will help your audience to understand it deeply.

The monotone voice is the contrast with the variety voice, the monotone voice. The monotone is featured by “the pitch, volume, and rate remain constant, with no word, idea, or sentence differing significantly in sound from any other. Although few people speak in a true monotone, many severely limit themselves by using only two or three pitch levels and relatively unchanging volume and rate. An actual or near monotone not only lulls an audience to sleep but, more important, diminishes the chances of audience understanding.”<sup>112</sup> For instance, if the sentence “Christians should put their trust in Jesus” is presented in a monotone, listeners will be uncertain whether

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<sup>110</sup> Rudolph F. Verderber, Kathleen S. Verderber, and Deanna D. Sellnow, *The Challenge of Effective Speaking*, 14th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007), 210.

<sup>111</sup> As quoted by Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 217.

<sup>112</sup> Verderber et al., *The Challenge of Effective Speaking*, 210.

the speaker is concerned with *who* should trust in Jesus, *what* Christians *should do* with their life, or to *whom* Christians should put their trust.

### Sample Sermons

#### Death is Not the End (John 11:1-44) by Andri Kosasih

My name is Thomas. Your bible recorded a part of my life with my great teacher, Jesus Christ. I guess, when you hear my name, you will remember the story in John 20. Yes, I am the one who didn't believe the resurrection of my teacher. I told to my brothers and sisters who saw him before me, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." I know I was wrong. Though I finally believe his resurrection finally, my brothers and sisters told me before that they saw Jesus appears to them. I shouldn't say that. I should believe in his resurrection is not because he appears before me, but because of what he said to us before his crucifixion.

Today, I want to share another resurrection story. It's not about the post-crucifixion events. It's about our old friends. John, my brother in Christ, recorded in his gospel chapter 11:1-44. The disciples, including me, are the eyewitnesses of a miraculous event.

One day, our teacher got the message from Mary and Martha. These women were from Bethany, a village just east of Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives, about one and a half miles away. Jews traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee commonly took the

route east to Jericho and then north to Galilee in order to avoid Samaria. This explains Jesus' frequent movement through Jericho (hence the stories of Bartimaeus, Mark 10:46; Zacchaeus, Luke 19:2; the good Samaritan, which takes its setting from this road, Luke 10:30 – 37) as well as his familiarity with Bethany, which was along this road. When he was in Jerusalem, Jesus used Bethany as his base (as he used Capernaum in Galilee). This is why the Gospels contain multiple stories related to the village (Matt 21:17; 26:6) and why Jesus likely lived here during the final week of his life.<sup>113</sup>

These women told Jesus, “the one you love” is sick. We know he is Lazarus, their brother. Yeah, this family is extremely dear to Jesus. You may not find their relationship mentioned in the other Gospels, unless in Luke 10:38-42, Jesus comes to a family and teaches them his word. Jesus loves this family and the sentence “the one you love” confirms it.

They sent the message, but they didn't ask Jesus to come. I think they knew the hostility of Jerusalem leaders toward Jesus. If he decides to go, it's a considerable risk. However, there is a dilemma. The sisters knew that they really need Jesus. He is well known as a healer. If Jesus comes to them, the problem will be solved.

When he got the message, he said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.” He didn't go and personally, I agreed. We didn't need to come if the sickness will not end in death. Jesus chose to stay and didn't come to Bethany.

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<sup>113</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 312.

Two days later, he said to us, "Let us go back to Judea." What? Other disciples replied to him, "But rabbi, a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" It's ridiculous to come to the area. It's a suicide journey to go back to Judea.

Jesus told us that Lazarus has fallen asleep and he is going there to wake him up. Once again, I do not understand. There is no problem with the man who falls asleep. He doesn't need to come to Bethany. Mary and Martha could wake Lazarus up from his sleep. So then, he told us plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

If Lazarus died, why should we go there? There is nothing we can do except show our sympathy to Mary and Martha. Moreover, the journey to the Bethany is very dangerous. The Jews were waiting to arrest, even to kill him. I think Mary and Martha will understand if Jesus decides not to come to them. It's not the right time. It's ridiculous to read in morning newspaper that Jesus dies because he visits Lazarus who died before.

However, he is our teacher and leader. As disciples, we have to obey and follow him. Even if he dies, we also have to get ready to die with him. His life is threatened and the Jews could kill him any time he comes to their region. It's a highly risky journey. That's why I said to others deliberately, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days when he arrived in Bethany. Lazarus's death was not a private period of mourning for his family. Life in New Testament Palestine was lived publicly and community ties were strong. As in today's

Middle East, relatives whom Westerners would consider distant cousins still had intimate contact with each other. Thus, many Jews (friends and relatives) have come to Bethany even from nearby Jerusalem to comfort Martha and Mary. There would be great wailing and crying, some beating their chests in grief. Hiring flute players was also common; even the Jewish oral law encouraged it.<sup>114</sup>

Formal mourning lasted for seven days, called in Hebrew the *shibah*, and it commenced immediately on the day of burial, which took place on the same day as death. We can assume that Lazarus was buried in a rock-cut tomb of the type that has been discovered throughout the hills of Judea. Inside a cave room (perhaps ten to fifteen square feet) burial benches were carved in stone along the inner wall. The body was prepared here and then laid in horizontally cut burial tunnels (Hebrew: *kochim*) about six feet deep and left there to decompose. After a year or so, the body was removed from the *koch* and the bones placed in a limestone “burial box” (an ossuary). The tomb was closed (and reopened for further burials) with a wheel-shaped “rolling stone” fitted to cover the entrance in a stone channel.<sup>115</sup>

When we were near enough to Bethany, Martha saw us and ran to us. She stands before Christ. Though I saw no tears, I saw her eyes swollen. She said, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” I said to myself, “Martha, you are right, there is nothing we can do right now. He had already been dead for four days in the tomb.” But, Jesus

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<sup>114</sup> Burge, *John*, 315.

<sup>115</sup> Burge, *John*, 315.

replied to her, "Your brother will rise again." Of course, he will rise again in the future. As Jews, we believe in the end-time resurrection. It's useless to say it right now. What they hope for, of course, Lazarus will rise again now, not later in resurrection day. They wish Lazarus will live again physically, right now. For me personally, Jesus wants to comfort Martha. Lazarus would be resurrected in the end-time and now, he is enjoying eternal life.

I think he really was a good teacher. He tried to do his best to comfort Martha. However, what Martha needed was a direct action from him. Yeah, I asked myself, "Why didn't he do the same thing to Lazarus, like he did to the widow's son in Nain (Luke 7:11 – 17) and Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21 – 43)?" Moreover, he said, "I am the resurrection and life." So, then, why did he do nothing until now to Lazarus if he is the resurrection?

In the midst of their conversation, Martha said to Jesus that he has to let Mary know. We just need to wait for several minutes and Mary then, come to us when we were still outside the village and inaccessible to the crowd. She ran from the house followed by other mourners.

Mary is really different from Martha. If Martha were a choleric woman, Mary is a melancholic one. She was still inside until Martha let her know. Mary then comes to us when we were still outside the village and inaccessible to the crowd. She runs from the house and followed by other mourners. She fell at his feet and said the same words as Martha, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." All people, including us the twelve, were touched by this scene. Mary weeps and it describes loud

wailing and crying, which is echoed by the people standing around Mary. Such loud public displays of grief were common in our culture.<sup>116</sup>

Suddenly, he weeps. I think Jesus was also touched by this scene. He asked to them, "Where have you laid him?" It's the first time I saw a weird expression in his face. It looked like outrage but also that he was troubled. Why is he getting angry? Is he angry at himself because he was late and the sisters were in a deep sadness? I think he cried for Lazarus. He is not just a great teacher but also a man of sympathy.

It's a surprise. He asked some people to roll back the stone. In first century, the Jews usually return to the cemetery after three days to check to see if the person was living. When we come, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. It means they checked the cemetery yesterday and closed again, the cemetery with the stone. Lazarus is truly dead and the miracle of Jesus was not simply one of resuscitating his friend.

Martha argued, "But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." What Martha means is Lazarus was really dead. But Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God." I felt shocked at that time. In Luke, you will find two other stories of Jesus raises the dead. He raises Jairus' daughter and the widow's son of Nain. In both, they died less than three days. I do not say that they don't die fully but in Lazarus' case, the dead man already passed through the traditional examination. It's impossible that he's still alive in the tomb. He has no oxygen to breath, no water and no food. I'm convinced that he's already dead.

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<sup>116</sup> Burge, *John*, 317.

Moreover, there will be an odor from his body. I think Martha was right. It's impossible for Lazarus was still alive in four days in a tomb.

He didn't wait for our answer but he continues to pray to the God. After he finished his prayer, he called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." All the people who saw this scene were covered by tension. All of us looked at him and at the tomb that already was opened.

My heart beats harder when I saw something comes out from the tomb. Something white move slowly to the entrance of the tomb. Slowly, we could see clearly. That it is a man's posture wrapped tightly. People shrink in awe because of this scene. Yes, we know who the man is. He is Lazarus. He stands before Jesus and Jesus talks to him.

All of us still shrink in awe when he commands someone to unbind Lazarus. It's hard to disbelieve that Lazarus lives again. Then, I saw Martha and Mary run to Lazarus. There are tears on their eyes, but it's not the tear of sadness, but happiness. Many people also come near to him. There is no loud wailing and crying again, but happiness and euphoria.

I still stand in my place looking at the scene. It's a miracle. It really happens. The dead is raised and live again. Now, there is no reason for the people, especially the Jewish leaders to reject that Jesus came from God. The Jewish who do not believe him may argue that the two cases before didn't pass the tradition examination. In your time, the modern scholar may claim that there is a possibility the dead is still alive. There is no reason to argue that it's not a miracle. There is no reason to say that he is

just a mad man from Nazareth. He comes from God even he is the God. He has power over death and life.

Now I understand why he wept and was angry in this event. He wept because of our disbelief, not because of Lazarus. He gets angry with the people who misunderstand why he wept. Previously, He said that he was not there while Lazarus was still alive "so that" you may believe. They think he cannot do anything for Lazarus because he has no power over the death. That's why my brother John wrote his Gospel "you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Before I go to sleep, I thought of this event again. It's hard to believe. My Lord raised Lazarus who died for four days. However, this event helps me to understand what is the meaning of his statement, "I am the resurrection and life." In your Bible, there are seven "I am" or ego eimi. As the Jews, these words would have recalled us when God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." When he said it, He let us know who he is. He is God and there is resurrection and life in him. He didn't say that he provided or he will show the way to the resurrection and the life but he himself is the resurrection and the life.

This statement also has an eternity meaning. The phrase I AM refers to the sense "exists." Thus, "I AM" means "I am He who exists, who is really present." He exists from eternity to eternity. When he said I am the resurrection and the life, to the people in this event, he doesn't mean that he has power to raise only Lazarus. He is the eternal God and in him only, there is an eternal life. If you want to live in eternity, you

cannot live out of him. If you wish death had no power over you, you have to stay in him. This does not mean that believers will not die physically. We have a sinful body in a sinful world. God promises to give us a new body in a new world. It happens beyond the grave. Death is not the end for those who believe in him but an entrance to the new life, the eternity.

Death is not the end for those who know him. It involves a transfer into a level of life not known on this earth. While this miracle reminds us of our frailty and mortality, it also shouts to us about God's power to raise and transform. No wonder the crowd who saw this miracle was filled with awe. We should be too, as we contemplate his creative power and compassion.

In his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, you will find an interesting concept that Jesus taught to him, "no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." No one will live again in eternity unless he is born again and if you want to be born again, you have to believe and stay in Christ. If you are not born again, there is no life. If you were born once only, you will die twice. If you were born twice, you will die once only. Only men who are born twice in him will be resurrected and live twice in eternity. For believers, death is a gate from worldly life to an eternal one.

Let me ask you to think about a few things before I leave. I think most of you will think seriously about your future. Maybe, you keep some money or investments for the future. I don't say that it's wrong if you have a bank account to save your money. It's not right if you think this stage is the last point of your life. It's not right to think everything is over when you die. No, the bible says it's not the end. There is a life

beyond the grave. The matter is not you will die or not but where you are going to. Have you ever thought where are you going after you die? You may have many investments or savings, but it will not bring you to the better place beyond the grave. After the death, there are two conditions for us: you will live or die in eternity. Which one will you choose? I hope you will choose to live again in eternity where there are no tears and pain. If you want to choose this way, you have to trust Christ because he is the God who has power over life and death. You have to surrender yourself totally to him. I hope you will choose the right choice.

Said = Done, Word = Done (Mark 1:21-28) by Don Sunukjian

Babe Ruth was the great home run hitter for the New York Yankees baseball team. Once when Ruth was batting, the home plate umpire, whose name was Babe Pinelli called him out on strikes. There was sort of a stunned silence in the stands. Ruth turned to Pinelli and said, "There's 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball." Pinelli replied, "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts."

We live in a world of thousands of opinions. Whose opinion counts? Who has the authority that matters?

There are experts in every field imaginable, some of whom say conflicting things. Who do we look to as our authority?

- For example, is global warming threatening the planet? Or is it a hyped-up scare to serve special interests groups? Who's right? Who's the authority that really knows?

- Should we compassionately take steps to provide health care for every American?

- Or would that increase our national debt to the point where it might cripple our future? Which is true? Who really knows?
- Should we pour more troops into Afghanistan, in hopes of stabilizing the country and perhaps capturing Osama ben Laden?
- Or should we conclude, as Britain and Russia have in years past, that the country is ungovernable, and extricate ourselves as soon as possible?

Most of us know that these are huge issues, that there are good arguments on both sides, that absolute certainty is difficult to arrive at, and that nobody will know for sure who's correct until events have played themselves out over a period of years.

And because of this—because the answers are so unknowable—and because any conclusion we might come to would have minimal effect on the course of events anyway—because of this, many times we listen to all the opinions, but no one of them counts more heavily with us than any other.

Since we don't think anyone really knows, and since the decision doesn't depend on us, it doesn't seem terribly critical that we settle on which authority we will go with.

But there are other times when the issues get closer to home, when they get very personal. And the course of action is entirely within our control. The outcome rests entirely on the decision we make. And at times like these, the question becomes more critical and penetrating. Who determines what I will decide, which direction I will go? Whose opinion do I listen to? Who becomes my authority?

When I have a difficult decision about how I will act during a stressful time in my marriage—my spouse has been unfaithful, or has deceived me in the area of our

finances, or has made a momentous decision affecting our family without talking it over with me—and I have to decide how I will act, who do I listen to? Oprah? Dr. Phil? Dear Abby? My parents? My best friend? Whose opinion counts?

When I'm deciding which movies I'll see or which TV programs I'll watch, or where I'll go on Saturday night, what influences me? Advertising? Hollywood? Word-of-mouth among my friends? Whose opinion counts?

When I'm making decisions about how to grow my business, or advance my career, or handle a sticky situation at work, where do I get direction from? Mentors? Magazine articles? Motivational seminars?

Who's my authority? Who do I listen to? The question can become critical and penetrating.

There were some people living in a lakeside community in the first century who were grappling with that question—Who should we listen to? Who should we look to for direction? Who really knows? Who's an authority?

A new teacher in the area was forcing them to grapple with this question. He'd been traveling around their province for the past few months, and they'd heard good things about him. A few weeks ago he'd come to their lakeside community, and some of their most prominent businessmen—leaders in the fishing industry—had started spending some time with him. The last few weekends, he'd been speaking in their synagogue services. And now the townspeople were trying to come to some conclusion about him.

His teaching was like nothing they'd ever heard before. What he was saying, and how he was saying it—it was so different from everything they were used to. He spoke with the ring of truth. And his words seemed to have an authority behind them. And they were blown away by it. They didn't know what to make of it.

And then something happened during one of their services that was so unusual, it was a bit scary. They could barely cope with it. They didn't know how to explain it. And they weren't sure they could handle what it might mean for them.

And as you and I grapple with the implications of it for us, the effect on us will be stunning and sobering as well.

Let's read about it in Mark 1, beginning in verse 21— *They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.*

Jesus is now in the lakeside city of **[Map - Capernaum]** Capernaum, the home of Peter and Andrew, and James and John—leaders in the area's fishing industry, who have begun to spend time with him. On weekends, he starts attending the local synagogue services, and is immediately asked to speak.

In those days, the synagogues didn't have salaried staff or resident teachers. The speaking or teaching was all done by lay-people within the congregation. A coordinator or facilitator supervised the services and scheduled the speakers.

Word had spread about Jesus, since he had already had been doing a lot of preaching throughout area. So when he came to Capernaum, they were very quick to invite him to be the speaker for as many times as he wished. **[Blank]**

And after a few weeks, the people are blown away by his teaching. Amazed. They didn't know what to make of it. Verse 22— *The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.* His words had authority. Not like the teachers of the law.

The teachers of the law were the religious scholars of the day. Some older translations of the Bible refer to them as scribes, from the idea that a scribe was an educated person, someone who could read and write. These scribes or teachers of the law knew the Jewish teachings of the elders; they knew the different biblical interpretations that had come down through the centuries. They could tell you, "Rabbi so-and-so said this. But Rabbi such-and-such thought it meant this instead. One way of looking at it is . . . Another way of looking at it is . . ."

They could teach you the options, but they couldn't decide among them. All they could do was repeat the traditions of the fathers long ago. But when Jesus taught, he spoke with a certainty that came from the Father above. His words had authority. They had the ring of truth. And the people said, "This is different than what we're used to. He's not like the scribes, he's not like the teachers of the law. His words have an authority. And they were blown away. Amazed."

And then one Sabbath, something happened during one of their services that was so unusual, it was a bit scary. They could barely cope with it. They didn't know how to explain it. And they weren't sure they could handle what it might mean for them.

And as you and I grapple with the implications of it for us, the effect on us will be stunning and sobering as well.

Let's read it in verses 23-28— *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.* When it says in verse 27 that *the people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this?"*—the word for *amazed* in verse 27 is very different in their language than the word used in verse 22.

Back up in verse 22, [εκπλησσω] when it says *the people were amazed at his teaching*, the Greek word that's used is the word εκπλησσω. Εκπλησσω has the idea that they were blown away, astonished, over-whelmed. His words have authority; his words have the ring of truth. Not like what they're used to. And they're amazed—εκπλησσω.

But in verse 27, [θαμβεω] when it says that *the people were amazed at what has just happened with the demon-possessed man*, the word for *amazed* is different. The word now used is θαμβεω, and θαμβεω in their language has the idea of fear creeping in. Something unexplainable and a bit scary is going on. They're not sure what to make of it.

The thing that's scary for them is not that a demon suddenly shouts out, but that Jesus has so much authority over the demon. It's not the presence of the demon, but Jesus' power over it.

Jesus simply speaks, and the demon has to leave. Jesus simply makes the decision, "This is not going to be," and the matter is settled. He just says it, and it's done. And this is a bit more than they can handle. To them, it's not the presence of the demon, but the authority Jesus has over it.

With us, it's the other way around. With us, it's the thought of a demon actually being in someone, and making them do something, that sounds strange to us. This is not a thought that occurs to us on a daily basis. We seldom explain anyone's behavior as being caused by a demon.

But at the same time, we have these unusual phrases that we use, such as—"What's gotten into you? What's come over you?"—when the behavior is something we can't explain. It's almost as though something else is going on.

And there are those times when we come across some evil that's beyond our ability to explain. An evil that's out of the ordinary, beyond normal human sinfulness. An evil that doesn't make sense.

It can be something in the newspaper so horrid that we shudder at it. How can such evil exist?

- This man and his wife who kidnapped an 11-year-old girl. Hid her in a tent in their backyard. The man repeatedly rapes her, so that when she's 14 she has a child. He

continues, and when she's 18 she has another child. And we say, "How can such evil exist?"

- Or, also in the paper this week—a mother stabs her two toddler daughters with a knife. It's beyond our ability to comprehend. Where did such evil come from?
- Or, on a lesser scale, we encounter some self-destructive behavior that just doesn't make sense. Some eating disorder—anorexia, bulimia—which brings tragedy and crisis on a daily basis.
- Or some teenage anger or hatred or rebellion which goes beyond the ordinary desire for independence and freedom.
- Or some person at work who seems driven by the desire to humiliate others—compelled to dominate and abuse and inflict misery. And we say, "What makes them be like that?"

It's an evil that doesn't make sense. We're at a loss to explain it, because our culture doesn't understand something that many other cultures of the world do.

And that is that there are evil demon beings that can enter a person and become a controlling force in their life. We can't see them; they're in spirit form. But they are serving Satan and his evil work in the world, and they can use people to make it happen.

They were created originally as part of God's throng of angels. But they joined Satan in his rebellion against God. And like him, they were cast out of heaven. And now these unseen demons are present in the air around us. And they carry out all of their anger and hatred for God against his creation and against the people he wants to

draw to himself. And if they target us, we humans are no match for them. We're powerless against them unless, as the Bible says, we have on the armor of God.

These demons are unseen, and diabolically intelligent. They're able to surreptitiously insinuate themselves inside a person and start to control them. And over time they cause the person to internally disintegrate, while outwardly they wreck havoc against anyone who comes in their path.

Once they take over, they're almost impossible to dislodge. It's seldom an issue of treatment or therapy. All that does is cause them to go under the radar for a period of time, until attention shifts elsewhere. And then their control surfaces again, and the destruction starts in again.

But the good news is that Christ came to destroy the works of the devil—to release those held captive by him, and to fill them instead with peace and holiness. Christ came to free someone from Satan's control, to connect them to God, and to give them joy and strength.

And so, in our passage today, Jesus shows for the first time his power to do this. He has absolute authority over the demon. He simply speaks, and the demon has to leave. No long ritual to cast the demon out. No incantation, no mumbo-jumbo, no incense, no props, no lengthy praying, no prolonged struggle.

Jesus simply makes the decision, "This is not going to be," and the matter is settled. He just gives the order—*Come out of him*—and the demon obeys him—he comes out of him.

Let's read it again, verse 23-24— *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"*

Sitting there in the room while Jesus is teaching, the demon is overcome by the force of holiness coming from Jesus' room. And taking control of the man's voice, the demon suddenly shouts out in fear and anguish— What do you want, Jesus? I know who you are. I know where you've come from. You're the Holy One God has sent. And I know what your goal is. You've come to destroy us, haven't you?

And then the simple authority of Jesus' word. Verse 25-26— *"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*

When Mark writes that Jesus spoke to the man *sternly*, he uses a very special word. It's a word that's often translated "rebuked." And some of our translations will say in this verse, "Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be quiet, and come out of him.'"

It's a special word we're going to come across several times in Mark. It's the Greek word επιτιμαω. And the reason Mark uses it is because in the Old Testament the equivalent word of επιτιμαω/*rebuke* was the word that was used when God simply spoke and his enemies were subdued.

God rebuked them, and they were destroyed. God's authoritative word made it happen. God simply said it, and it was done.

We see this language in several places in the Old Testament—God rebukes. God makes the decision, “This shall not be”—and his simple word is so authoritative, just is word is so powerful, that the result immediately happens.

We see it, for example in Psalm 9 — *You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked. You have blotted out their name for ever and ever. Endless ruin has overtaken the enemy, you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished. Psalm 9:5-6.*

All of this comes from God’s rebuke. God rebuked them, and they were destroyed. God simply said it, and it happened.

We see the same language in Psalm 76 — *Valiant men lie plundered, they sleep their last sleep; Not one of the warriors can lift his hands. At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both horse and chariot lie still. You alone are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry? Psalm 76:5-7*

God’s rebuking word all by itself has such authority that immediately horse and chariot are impotent. [ἐπιτιμαω - **said=done, word=deed**] When he says it, it’s done. His word is the deed.

Mark uses this language, the language of “rebuke”—God’s authoritative word which immediately brings his enemies under his control—Mark uses this language to show that the people of Capernaum are being confronted with who Jesus really is—he has the same authority as God. He just speaks, and it happens—all enemies are under his control.

And the people don't know how to handle it. Verse 27— *"The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.'"*

What's going on here? Who is this one? *He gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.* He simply speaks, and the demon has to leave. He simply makes the decision, "This is the way it's going to be," and the matter is settled. He just says it, and it's done. His word is the deed.

And their amazement has a bit of fear in it. They're not sure how to handle this level of authority.

As you and I grapple with the implications of this for us, we find that we are faced with the same decision:

- Are we prepared for this kind of authority in our lives — an authority where his word makes it true and his decision makes it happen? An authority where when he says something it's true and when he decides something, it happens?
- Are we prepared for this kind of authority in our lives? When our spouse has been unfaithful, or deceived us, or made a decision without us, and we have to decide how to act, is his word our authority?

My friend, it must be. His word must be our authority, because he who speaks also decides how things will be. He who speaks also holds all the power to make things happen. And at any moment his power can decide, "This is how it will be."

When we're deciding which moves we'll see or which TV programs we'll watch, or where we'll go and what we'll do on the weekend, do his words become the truth for us?

My friend, they must. Because he who speaks also decides how things will be. He who speaks also holds all the power, and he determines what will happen in our life.

When we're making decisions about how to grow our business, or advance our career, or handle a sticky situation at work, does our direction come from him whose word is true?

It must. Because he who speaks also decides. And he will determine what happens.

My friend, you and I must come to grips with the power of Christ. His word makes it true. His decision makes it happen. His authority makes it so.

Let us hear him, and obey.

Jesus is the Lord of Celebration (John 2:1-11) by Richard Harrington

## **Introduction**

Do you ever find life to be a bit monotonous? Do you ever find life to be a bit boring? Repetitive? Dry? Going to work every day, running in the rat race, doing the daily grind.

The Greeks in their mythology had a way of illustrating this dreadful monotony of life. Sisyphus was a Greek king who is in Hades punished by being compelled to roll a

huge boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, and to repeat this throughout eternity.

One thing that shakes up our monotony is a party: Birthday parties, anniversaries dinners, reunions, weddings. But of course, even our celebrations have to end. What if I told you that Jesus offers us eternal celebration? What if I told you that he is the Lord of Celebration?

### **Retell Story**

Here we see Jesus attending a wedding in Cana. Jesus' mother, Mary was also there and perhaps is playing some official role in organizing this wedding. Jesus' disciples have also been invited to this wedding.

At this wedding we see a potential disaster happens at this wedding. They run out of wine. Now to us that doesn't seem to be a big deal. But for the custom of that day, weddings would last a week, and for them to run out of wine at a wedding would produce a serious social embarrassment. Actually lawsuits could be brought against the groom's family for it. It would be taken as an insult to the guests, and would reflect negatively on the newlywed couple. So Mary decides to tell her son Jesus *'they have no more wine.'* What she expected of him, we cannot be sure. Maybe she is hoping he will do a miracle.

This is officially his first miracle, but she has seen angels announce his birth, she has seen shepherds welcome him in the manger, she has seen Magi from the east bring

gifts. By this time she knows there is something unique about this son. Not to mention he was born in her virginity.

She comes to him almost demanding, "They have no more wine, you Jesus as my first born son need to do something about this"

Jesus says to her '*Dear woman, why do you involve me?*' Jesus refers to his mother as 'woman' rather than 'mother', which was a respectful way of addressing a female in his day. Though she is His mother, Jesus wishes to clearly separate himself from her authority. It is important for Jesus to make clear that there are no special rights of access to him. Mary must come to him like any other 'woman' who would ask for Jesus' help. It may surprise some of us to note that this is not the only time that Jesus does this. He often creates separation between himself and his mother. She must look to him as savior now, no longer as son. Think how difficult this must have been for Mary. One commentator writes, "For this we should honour her the more."

Jesus says '*my time has not yet come*' or literally '*My hour has not yet come*' This is a veiled reference to the cross. This hour or time he refers to is mentioned throughout the gospel of John. We see in a number of places, 'his hour had not yet come.' But eventually Jesus will say in the shadow of the cross, 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify you.' Jesus recognizes his hour, the hour for which he has come, is the hour of his death. The hour he will go to the cross in our behalf.

Now this may seem like a strange answer to Mary "Jesus do something about the wine." "Women, I am not yet ready to die." But when you think about it, it does make

perfect sense. He is not yet ready to fully show who he is. Jesus is hesitant to reveal his glory too early. The time for the cross and the resurrection is still to come. Jesus would continue with a three year ministry before this.

His mother responds speaking to the servants, *"Do whatever he tells you."* Feeling perhaps a little stung by his response she simply says, "Do whatever he tells you." Do you see the difference? She now approaches him not as son but as Lord. "Do whatever he tells you?"

Nearby there is six stone water jars, used for ceremonial washing, each holding 20-30 gallons of water. And Jesus says to the servants, 'Fill them up.' He then tells them to draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. They of course obey him.

The water miraculously turns into wine. If you do the math, that's 120-180 gallons of wine. That's a lot of wine! The master of the banquet tastes the wine, and loves it. He calls the groom aside and says without much tact, *'Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now!'*

John wraps up this section by telling us that this is the first of the Savior's miraculous signs. "Jesus revealed his glory," I love that! And because of this brief revelation, Jesus disciples put their faith in him, they begin to understand who he is.

This is the first of Jesus miracles. What would you expect Jesus' first miracle to be? I mean this is going to be what gets his ministry going. This is his introduction to the world that he is Messiah. What would you expect? Healing the sick? Raising the

dead? Walking on water? Jesus first miracle: he made 120-180 gallons of delicious wine for a local wedding. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. Jesus is the Lord of Celebration. Wine is a symbol of celebration.

Christopher Hitchens, the caustic atheist, was asked in an interview, "What's your favorite Bible story?" He answered in mockery, "...[one of them was] the first of the miracles. Jesus changes water into wine. You can't object to that."<sup>117</sup> He answered truer than he knew. Jesus is the Lord of Celebration. His ministry is not a dour, gloomy, ministry. It is a ministry that brings about joy and the hope of the resurrection. The cheap wine of the Law is being replaced by the new wine of the gospel.

How does this apply to us?

### **Application**

I want us to look at three specific ways.

#### **1. Jesus affirms marriage**

It is no coincidence that Jesus' first miracle takes place at a wedding. That's because a wedding is a celebration that begins one of the most Biblically important covenants God has made: marriage.

Do you know where marriage begins in the Bible? Genesis 1, God makes Adam and Eve, male and female in his own Image. In Genesis 2 God creates Adam as the first man, and then seeing that it is not good for him to be alone brings Eve to him, as the Father of the Bride, creating her out of his side. And the two should become one flesh.

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<sup>117</sup> Interviewed by *New York Magazine*, Boris Kachka, April 26, 2007.

Do you know where the last reference to marriage is in the Bible? Revelation 22, the last chapter in the Bible "And the Spirit and the bride say 'Come'". The Church as the bride of Christ is calling forth for Jesus as the groom to come to our rescue. Revelation 19:9 says, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" The final celebration, when Christ returns is seen as the uniting of Christ with his people. It is described as a wedding celebration.

God is pro-marriage. Jesus is pro-marriage. Christians of all people should be pro-marriage. This doesn't mean that every Christian is called to be married, they're not. Jesus was not married. The apostle Paul was not married. Numerous incredible men and women of God throughout all of church history were never married. Nor does this mean that divorce is the unpardonable sin, that is for a different sermon at a different time. Marriage is not a side note to Christian faith, it is right smack dab in the middle of it.

For those of us who are married here, the status of our marriage says a lot about us, doesn't it? For the men here, it says something about what kind of man you are. Are you faithful? Are you loyal? Are you able to be a protector and provider for someone other than yourself? I've been married for 10 years now, one of my goals in life is for my wife to feel completely safe, provided for, and trusting of my fidelity to her. Isn't that what God does for us? I had a professor say before "I would rather die than commit adultery" And his point was that, for me to be unfaithful to my wife would be to betray all that my life has stood for. To die is nothing compared to that.

The Bible lists as a qualification for church leaders, that if they are married they are to be a one woman man. I love the fact that our church has a senior pastor who has been faithfully married to the same woman for over 40 years. The chairman of the board of elders just last night celebrated his 50 year anniversary.

Jesus begins his miracles at a wedding. In doing so he affirms the covenant of marriage, and gives us a foreshadowing the wedding feast which is to come. We need to be pro-marriage. Not just legally, although that too, especially in Massachusetts. But even within our church. Praying for marriages, protecting marriages, counseling each other. Helping those who are looking to get married to make wise careful Biblical choices. How do you go about looking for a wife or a husband? What should you be looking for?

Jesus affirms marriage with his very first miracle.

## 2. Jesus brings celebration

It's not just about marriage, it's about a celebration. Jesus is the Lord of celebration. His first miracle takes place at a party. Not only does it take place at a party, he actually creates the wine. This is not grape juice folks! Understand that the Bible condemns drunkenness, and for some people abstaining from alcohol is a must, but wine here represents celebration.

It is so wrong-headed to look at Christianity as a dour, somber, gloomy thing. It is a celebration! Jesus has come! Our long awaited King! Our sins are forgiven! We

have been reconciled to God! We are made his own! The fallen sinful world which we live in has its days numbered now! God will one day restore it!

Isn't it interesting that Jesus takes these old jars previously used for ceremonial washing to make the wine? Vessels which were previously used for ritual and ceremony, for obedience to the Law, are now used as vessels of celebration! Of enjoying the celebration of the new covenant under grace.

Healing the sick and raising the dead are important signs that reveal something about Jesus, but this miracle reveals the whole purpose of his coming! He is the Lord of Celebration. The gospel has come and it is time to celebrate!

I've heard it said before, and I think it is true, that every Sunday should be joyful. I don't mean just a fun and happy-clappy experience. It shouldn't be like watching a cheesy feel good movie, it should be like attending a wedding. Truly joyful. It should remind us of the joy of the gospel. We should never leave here depressed about our sin or about the world. We should leave reminding of the Lord of Celebration. A time of fellowship, of worship, of hope.

I hope that kids grow up in our church associate our church with joy. Yes, I hope they associate church with self-sacrifice, with reverence. But I hope they always associate it with joy. Jesus is the Lord of celebration and he has come.

### 3. Jesus saves the best till last

I think John in telling this story about Jesus, points to the fact that the tactless master of ceremonies spoke beyond his own understanding. *'Everyone brings out the*

*choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now!*

The point being, the law came first, but grace has come later. The cheap wine came first, but the gospel has come now. The best is yet to come. For Christians, the best is always yet to come.

I remember when I attending my first Italian wedding. Genuine Italian wedding. We sit down and they serve the appetizers. Tasty. After the appetizers comes the salads. Good. Then comes the antepasto. Very Good. Then comes sherbet to cleanse the palate. Then comes the Prime Rib. Delicious. Then comes the cake and the ice cream. At that time I'm thinking, I can't eat another bite of anything. Little did I know even then the best was yet to come. The Italian dessert table: Cannolis, cakes, pies, cookies! I don't know how they survive in Italy!

Friends as Christians, the best is always yet to come. After this miracle of the wine, Jesus would go on to minister to tens of thousands, healing the sick and raising the dead. And his disciples must have been shocked and overjoyed. But the best was yet to come. After this he would go to the cross, and on the cross he would become our substitute and sacrifice in our place to save us for our sins. But even then, the best was yet to come. Three days later, he would rise from the dead, and in doing so would give all those who have faith in hope the hope of resurrection. But even then the best was yet to come. God would pour out his Spirit upon his people and would be with them as the gospel spreads to the ends of the world. Even as we ourselves have been brought into the story as the gospel has come to us. But even for us, the best is yet to come!

The day will come when Christ will return, and in doing so will restore this fallen world and bring about the union of heaven and earth. We will be united with Christ and with believers who have gone before us. And even in eternity, I think it will be true that the best is still yet to come, C. S. Lewis describes it, "every chapter is better than the one before".<sup>118</sup>

Jesus is the Lord of Celebration. The symbol of Sisyphus having to roll his stone up a hill for all eternity might be an appropriate one for many. And many may relate well to him. For the non-Christian life might be monotonous, boring, dry. But not for us. The only stone in our story is the stone water jars filled with the wine of Wedding. We have the Lord of Celebration!

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<sup>118</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 211.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUTCOMES

This thesis-project is composed in order to provide a manual in preaching miracle stories of the Gospels. In chapter 2, the theological foundation is presented from the Gospel texts to find out the concept and understand about the miracle according to the original intention of the gospel authors. Chapter 3 presents the literature about preaching, interprets miracle texts and preaches miracle texts, as well as explores contemporary views of miracles and how Christianity responds to it. In the chapter, I summarize the interviews that I conducted with five local pastors concerning the preaching of miracle stories of the gospels.

Chapter 4 presents a manual to compose miracle stories sermon. The manual is designed to be used either by pastors in their sermon preparation or seminary students in their homiletic study. The goal of the manual, and of this project, is to show them a step-by-step process in preparing and delivering miracle stories of the Gospel sermons. In order to know this manual is easily understood and followed, I have to teach this manual to pastors or seminary students. This chapter will describe the event, and summarize the evaluative feedback and my own reflections on the seminar.

#### **The Seminars**

On May 25, 2011, I presented a seminar on Preaching Miracle Stories of the Gospels to Aletheia Theological Seminary in Lawang, East Java, Indonesia. This seminar

is conducted into two sessions, morning and afternoon. After the last session, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the seminar.

Below is their personal data:

- There are 51 participants: 22 men and 29 women.
- Most of the participants are in the undergraduate level. There are 14 participants in their first year; 9 participants in the second year; 16 participants in the third year; 10 participants in the fourth year. There is one participant who has the first undergraduate degree in theology and one participant is in the certificate program.
- Forty-six participants come from the high school. Three participants were taking undergraduate degree in College. Two participants have bachelor degree.

### **Evaluative Feedback**

All participants were the students of the seminary. At the end of the seminar, I asked the participants to complete evaluation composed into two groups: the Quantitative and Qualitative feedbacks. In the first part, the quantitative feedback, participants were asked to rate the seminar using the following scale:

Strongly disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

The summary of feedback results of the first group:

- The first question asked the participants to rate whether they understand the material easily. The average score was 3.56 out of 5, indicating that the material is understandable enough.

- On the second question, the participants were asked about their belief that the material will help them to prepare miracle stories of the Gospels sermon. The average score was 4.04 out of 5, indicating that the participants perceive the material is useful for their sermon preparation
- The next question is how systematic the material is. The average score was 3.92 out of 5, indicating the material is composed systematically though I believe I can do better.
- Whether the material fulfills participants' expectation is the fourth question. The average score was 3.47 out of 5, indicating some participants have more expectation to be fulfilled when they know the title of the seminar.
- The fifth question is about how interactive the seminar presentation is. The average score was 3.45 out of 5, indicating some participants hope the seminar is presented more interactively.
- The last question, which has the lowest score, 2.8 out of 5, asked the participants if the material was presented in interesting manner. Though the score at the average level, I perceive that I suppose get better in this area.

In the second group, there are four questions that were asked to the participants. The first question is what the main idea of this seminar is. Most of the participants said their big idea from the title of the seminar. Some said a material part: preaching according to God's word, how to preach miracle stories accurately, how to preach God's word accurately and responsibly.

Second, participants were asked to identify the seminar's strengths. First dominant response identified strengths in terms of the content of the seminar: the material is presented systematically. Second, this seminar introduced the new material in handling miracle text. Some participants said they had the Gospel course in their first year, and this seminar helped them to see and clearly understand some materials that they could not understand previously in their first year. Third, this seminar introduced them some useful resources for their ministry.

Next, participants were asked to identify the seminar's weaknesses. There are three most outstanding responses: first, I have to be more interactive to the participants. Actually, I provided some minutes for questions and answers at the end of seminar. However, it didn't help the seminar to be more interactive as the participants expect. It means I have to think other ways to be more interactive, beside the question and answer session. Second, I have to be more interesting in my presentation. Perhaps, it has connection with the first weakness. Though I used power points in this seminar, I have to think how to be more interesting in the next seminar. Third, they wished more time in this seminar. I think it can be a strength point, because it shows their interest in the seminar topic. However, they need more time to understand the materials as I wished comprehensively.

The last, participants were asked to identify what they had learned in the seminar. Most identified what they had learned in relation to sermon preparation: they learned the proper method on how to interpret miracle text. They gave a general comment: they learned how to make a sermon according to God's word. Some

participants make it more specific. They connected the biblical preaching to some terms: Christ, christology, theologically, and God. For example, biblical preaching is preaching christologically, or preaching theologically.

Other participants learned how to get the right meaning of the text. Before they attend this seminar, they thought some main messages as the main message of the text. In this seminar, they admit that they found the true meaning of the text. The seminar helped to interpret the text accurately.

### **What I Learned from This Seminar**

First, I learned to be more people-oriented than material-oriented. I concluded it when I read some outstanding comments which said that the participants could not understand some parts clearly. I also thought that's why I got score 2.8 out of 5 when the participants were asked do the material presented in an interesting manner. I was driven to complete my material target for each session and lost my concern how to deliver the material in an interesting manner. I prepared more materials than I could reasonably cover in the scheduled time. I thought I had set a realistic schedule and material proportionally, but I did not think how much time it takes to teach each part of materials. If I had the seminar over again, I would compose my teaching plan in more details, including how much time to interact with the participants for each part in more details than I made previously.

Second, I have to give more examples for every principle or important statement. Some participants need more effort to understand my material and I didn't

have enough examples for each part. Maybe, I just mentioned a few examples and the participants need more time to understand it properly. This is one of the ways for a people-oriented speaker to make sure that the material is easy to understand by the audience.

Third, I need to show the problems in interpreting and preaching miracle texts at the beginning of the seminar. They will show their interest if I could show inaccurate ways in handling miracle text as preachers usually do today. I have to begin the seminar with these problems. I have to begin from their sides before I invite them to join me.

Every biblical preacher should take preaching miracle stories of the Gospels seriously in their pulpit ministry. Hopefully, this thesis-project will help and encourage every preacher in studying and preparing the sermons from miracle text accurately and delivering it to their audience relevantly and interestingly.

## APPENDIX 1

### INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL PASTORS

Rev. Sia Kok Sin

(Pastor of *Gereja Kristus Tuhan Hosana* in Surabaya)

**Kosasih:** Describe the church where you serve in terms of its ethnic, character, economic condition, etc?

**Sia:** The majority of people in my church come from Chinese background or ethnics. They have heterogenic background in their economic condition.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral experience and interaction to your congregation, what is the concept of your congregation about miracle? Do you think their concept is biblical?

**Sia:** The congregation generally believes in miracles, although they may not have experienced remarkable miracles in their lives. It seems they do not want to raise their hopes up when they experience miracles in their lives.

**Kosasih:** What is miracle story of the Gospels that you most like? Why? What is the meaning of that story for our contemporary lives?

**Sia:** My favorite miracle story is when Jesus feeds 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fishes. The reason is this story provides hope for church members who

are experiencing economic struggles. The meaning of the story is the providence of God for people.

**Kosasih:** What is miracle story of the Gospels that you most dislike?

**Sia:** I don't have one that I dislike.

**Kosasih:** How do you prepare your messages on miracle stories? Describe brief steps in composing the sermon?

**Sia:** First, I try to understand the essence and outline of the story. Then, I try to find the form of the miracle that is disclosed: healing, exorcism, nature, etc., and place the story within the framework of the concept of miracles and the omnipotence of God's concern for humans and believers in the struggles of their lives. At last, I will apply it paradigmatically and not literally, so the congregation could put their hope in God to overcome their daily struggles.

**Kosasih:** What do you mean by apply it paradigmatically?

**Sia:** I find paradigmatic interpretation in C.H. Wright who wrote many books in Old Testament Ethics. For example: the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people. The truth of the story is Jesus cares about and helps us in our needs. The application is that we have many different kinds of needs but the most important thing to remember is that Jesus cares and will help us in all our needs (not only our need for food)

**Kosasih:** Do you agree with single-idea sermon?

**Sia:** I tend to hold the sermon with single idea only. I think the audience of today finds it hard to remember many things as an effect of the current television culture that replaced the reading culture.

**Kosasih:** How do you know the needs of your congregations in preaching? In what sense it's supporting the relevance of your sermons?

**Sia:** I determine the needs of the community through personal conversations, counseling and visitations. The Chinese-Indonesians are very pleased to be visited by the pastor as a form of attention and love. It is not enough to just pray for them, but we, as pastors, have to help them in concrete ways, or involve the church board to extend help. Generally they appreciate pastors or ministers who want to visit them.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral and preaching experience, what is the greatest challenge in preaching the miracle stories from the Bible?

**Sia:** The congregation feels that the stories are real stories of Jesus' day, but do not have relevancy for their time, although they believe that miracles of God are still going on today.

**Kosasih:** A fresh-graduate pastor come and consults to you concerning preaching miracle stories of the gospels. What are your suggestions and recommendations for him?

**Sia:** My advice is he has to avoid a simplistic and literal application, but places it within the framework of God's omnipotence and concern for human life.

**Kosasih:** If somebody wants to compose a manual in how to preach miracle stories of the Gospels, what is your expectation to the writer?

**Sia:** I hope the writer provides an overview of the concept of miracles and its relevance for contemporary life. Second, he should provide an adequate description in how to apply it.

**Kosasih:** Is there a homiletic book that influences you in preaching?

**Sia:** I don't read homiletic books for a long time, unless the book that relates to the Old Testament preaching, as the works of Walter Kaiser, Sidney Greidanus, etc. I also read and like John Stott's *Between Two Worlds* long time ago.

**Kosasih:** Thanks for your time and sharing, Pastor Sia.

**Sia:** You're welcome. Please let me know if you have any questions for this topic. God bless you.

Rev. Nathanael Channing

(Pastor of *Gereja Kristen Indonesia Sulung* in Surabaya)

**Kosasih:** Thanks for your time. I would like to ask you some questions about preaching miracle stories of the Gospels. For the first, would you tell me about your church?

**Channing:** My congregation come from heterogonic tribes in Indonesia. Majority of them are Chinese from second generation who can't speak mandarin fluently and have Dutch influence. Most of them are in the middle-low economic level.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral experience and interaction to your congregation, what is the concept of your congregation about miracle? Do you think their concept is biblical?

**Channing:** My congregation tends to see miracles and providence of God as the same things. Miracles are generally understood by my congregation as the providence of God every day, from waking in the morning to sleeping at night, these are miracles from God. Though they believe that there are spectacular miracles and, while they happen to some people, it does not affect other people who have not experienced such miracles. They trust on the providence of God every day, in their work and ministry and these are also regarded as miracles from God.

**Kosasih:** Do you have a favorite miracle story?

**Channing:** Yes, I have. Jesus changes water into wine in John 2.

**Kosasih:** According to you, what is the meaning of this story?

**Channing:** First, this story shows God's providence to every person who is in a predicament. Second, in this story, we see God's providence that was right on time. Third, He pays attention even to small matters. Fourth, God cannot be ruled by human desires. Fifth, He is sovereign over time and work. Six, His providence will bring peace and joy.

**Kosasih:** And what is miracle story of the Gospels that you most dislike?

**Channing:** Jesus raises Lazarus and other similar stories.

**Kosasih:** Why?

**Channing:** First, the context is used to demands the dead to be raised today. Second, if there was a resurrection from the dead in the past, why is there no same events today? Third, is God's sovereignty different in ancient times from today? Fourth, those stories happened in the past and will not happen in today's times. The last, I finds it difficult to preach this text most especially in applying it to people who are grieving.

**Kosasih:** How do you prepare your messages on miracle stories? Describe brief steps in composing the sermon?

**Channing:** First, I start from the context of the text. Second, I study the context and the text to get its meaning or main message. After that, I build the bridge to see the connection between ancient time and contemporary time. Then, I apply the message

from the text to his context by using the proper application that fits with ancient context. Last, seek for the proper illustrations and the real contextual application.

**Kosasih:** You said that you study the text to find the meaning or main message. Do you agree that every sermon should have one single idea only?

**Channing:** Yes, I agree.

**Kosasih:** You said that you need to find the proper illustration for your sermon. What is the role of illustration in preaching? What is the significance of illustration?

**Channing:** Illustration effectively channel the main message to the congregation. Theological concepts that make headlines in the text must be translated into practical life - the reality of church life. The events in church, society or daily lives really help him find accurate illustrations. Thus the message of God's Word will come down to earth and be applied in concrete ways.

**Kosasih:** How do you know the needs of your congregations in preaching? In what sense it's supporting the relevance of your sermons?

**Channing:** First of all, a close relationship with the congregation. It's not just for certain levels, but for all socio-economic levels, from the poorest to the richest. Second, a good relationship will create open communication and it will make them talk openly and honestly so that we can see their problem clearly. They will readily talk about the

realities of their lives, rather than in slapstick or veiled languages that make them seem fine.

Their problems include economic pressures. This causes people to live in uncertainty and worry. This is the main cause of corruption that exists in all levels of society in Indonesia. This problem leads to more problems in Indonesia such as a high-crimes rate, acts of violence, and extortion in many places. Other problems are associated with family matters like bad communication between husband and wife which leads to infidelity. Because they only think of making money and their children's education, they have no time for family.

These problems are very relevant in preaching. People wait for the message of the word of God that will strengthen, lead and give them the way out as Christians. Their lives interact directly with people in secular world. Their problem should be answered with the truth of the word of God.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral and preaching experience, what is the greatest challenge in preaching the miracle stories from the Bible?

**Channing:** First, do not bring the congregation into an area that is not realistic. Do not let religion be like opium to fulfill fake needs. Second, be careful to answer the person who has urgent needs and wants a quick response. Third, Do not get stuck on the impatience of the church members who await the Lord's help. Their impatience can lead them to the wrong understanding of miracles as fairy tales in the past when nothing happens in their waiting time.

**Kosasih:** If a fresh-graduate pastor ask your advice and tips about how to preach miracle stories of the gospels. What will you say to him?

**Channing:** I will ask him to establish an intimate communication with members of the congregation. I will ask him to find out the congregation's problems. His own observation will make him to feel it than hear the same things from others. Preaching must touch the real needs of the congregation.

**Kosasih:** If somebody wants to compose a manual in how to preach miracle stories of the Gospels, what is your expectation to the writer?

**Channing:** The miracle sermon must explain the meaning of miracles with the right concept and context. After that, the sermon must answer the needs of the congregation because miracles should not only equip the cognitive and affective domains. Preachers should bring the explanation of the omnipotence and sovereignty of God to His people in present time.

**Kosasih:** Pastor Channing, thanks for your time and sharing your pastoral ministry and experience, especially your preaching.

**Channing:** God help you in completing your thesis-project. It's just for his glory.

Rev. Djusianto Sutedjo

(Pastor of *Gereja Kristen Indonesia Residen Sudirman* in Surabaya)

**Kosasih:** Describe the church where you serve and the people who visit it. Are they mostly from ethnic groups or specific? What about their economic condition?

**Sutedjo:** Residen Sudirman Indonesia Christian Church has Chinese ethnic background. People in this church have a wish to bring people as many as possible to Christ. So, that's why they name their church Indonesia Christian Church. The emphasis in Indonesia is not just in the language, but also show by multiple ethnics who attending this church. There are multiple ethnic, Javanese, Chinese, Batak, Kalimantan Island (Dayak ethnic), Sangir, Maluku (Ambon), Kupang, and Manado. Recent condition, majority is javanese. Twenty until thirty percent is middle to above economically and seventy until eighty percent is middle to low.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral experience and interaction to your congregation, what is the concept of your congregation about miracle? Do you think their concept is biblical?

**Sutedjo:** They have biblical concept. They think the miracles in the bible really ever happened and are real.

**Kosasih:** What is miracle story of the Gospels that you most like? Why? What is the meaning of that story for our contemporary lives?

**Sutedjo:** I really likes the stories of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter and healing a

woman who is sick from bleeding (Luke 8:40-56). In this passage we see that Jesus heals a woman who experienced bleeding for 12 years and also heals (raises) the daughter of the chief of the synagogue. The lesson of this story is that Jesus heals all kinds of people from various walks of life, including from a religious group (Jairus's daughter), as well as from the ordinary classes of people (women who are sick of bleeding). Both of them have incredible faith in Jesus.

**Kosasih:** What is miracle story of the Gospels that you most dislike? Why? What is the meaning of that story for our contemporary lives?

**Sutedjo:** Jesus curses the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-22. It is difficult because in another part of the Gospel of Mark 11:12-14 is said that the tree is not bearing fruit in season. I think the purpose of the story are, first, Jesus has power over the universe, including the fig tree and second, to teach us to believe sincerely in the Lord Jesus.

**Kosasih:** How do you prepare your messages on miracle stories? Describe brief steps in composing the sermon?

**Sutedjo:** First, studying the background and paying attention to the relationship of the text, to what precedes and follows it. Second, focuses on the word study and seeks the meaning of the words. Third, crystallizes it into a main message for ancient times. Lastly, makes the application for today.

**Kosasih:** How do you know the needs of your congregations in preaching? In what sense it's supporting the relevance of your sermons?

**Sutedjo:** Interact with my congregation, mainly through pastoral visitations. The pastors have to pay attention on the environment around them (society), and take note of any trends happening at this time (e.g. suicide). Pastors can also read the newspapers, or browse the Internet to find out the current events.

**Kosasih:** Do you agree that every sermon should have single-idea only?

**Sutedjo:** For me, it's shouldn't single idea. But I prefer to focus on one main message, and developed with sub-themes that refer to the main message. So, for me, the main message is more obvious if there is one only and be sharpened with a sub-themes (points) but not too much, and should always refer to the main message. If there are too many sub-themes (points), it's too difficult for congregation to get the main message.

**Kosasih:** What is homiletical textbook that help you in preaching?

**Sutedjo:** Hasan Sutanto's book.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral and preaching experience, what is the greatest challenge in preaching the miracle stories from the Bible?

**Sutedjo:** If we say it's not difficult to preach it, the most difficult thing is to apply it, even to practice it. For example, how to pray for the sick so he get to be healed (get a miracle).

**Kosasih:** Imagine a fresh-graduate pastor come and consult to you concerning preaching miracle stories of the gospels. What are your suggestions and recommendations for him/her?

**Sutedjo:** I suggest he follows my steps in preparing sermon.

**Kosasih:** If somebody wants to compose a manual in how to preach miracle stories of the Gospels, what is your expectation to the writer?

**Sutedjo:** First, give attention to the background as complete as possible. Second, perhaps all miracles have close connection with somebody's faith, so it's good if the writer already has faith with Jesus. He already practices the power of Jesus.

**Kosasih:** Thanks for your time. Your information will be a great contribution for my project.

**Sutedjo:** You're welcome. Please let me know if you have any question in the next days. Send my family's regard to your family.

Rev. Soetjipto Notonegoro

(Pastor of *Gereja Kristen Kalam Kudus Kupang Jaya* in Surabaya)

**Kosasih:** Would you please tell me about your church? The people? Their background or everything about your congregation?

**Notonegoro:** My congregations is variety in ethnics, education, social and ages. Most of the people are Chinese people, 45 years above and middle-low economic level

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral experience and interaction to your congregation, what is the concept of your congregation about miracle? Do you think their concept is biblical?

**Notonegoro:** I think their concept is biblical. They believe miracles can still happen, but do not focus their lives in miracles

**Kosasih:** What is your favorite miracle story?

**Notonegoro:** Perhaps, it's not the favorite one. What I have in mind is the miracle of the five loaves of bread and two fish.

**Kosasih:** According to you, what is the meaning of that story?

**Notonegoro:** God will use everything in us for the glory of His name and as a blessing to many people.

**Kosasih:** How do you prepare your messages on miracle stories? Describe brief steps in composing the sermon?

**Notonegoro:** First, I read the passage. Then, reflect on questions related to the story and questions that may occur in the church. After that, I read commentaries, gather specific information related to the socio-cultural context, the term/word. The next is summarize the main message and its relevance for today's congregation. The last is arrange the outline, complete with illustrations and supporting materials.

**Kosasih:** In what way, are illustrations important for your sermon?

**Notonegoro:** It helps the congregation to understand the sermon well.

**Kosasih:** Do you agree that every sermon should have single-idea only?

**Notonegoro:** Yes, I do. However, we must to be humble, not to claim that our main idea is the absolute truth.

**Kosasih:** Is there any homiletical book that influence your pulpit ministry?

**Notonegoro:** No, there is not. Perhaps I've got influence from the materials course when I was in the seminary

**Kosasih:** How do you know the needs of your congregations in preaching?

**Notonegoro:** I get help from personal interaction and small group. These groups are helpful in getting information from the congregation regarding the messages preached. These interactions also helps me to get feedbacks after I preach.

**Kosasih:** You are in your congregation almost ten years. What is the greatest challenge in preaching the miracle stories from the Bible?

**Notonegoro:** The greatest challenge is deliver the sermon as clearly as possible, to not reduce the faith / hope of the congregation, but to help them to keep on believing / hoping in God, not in the miracle.

**Kosasih:** What is your advice or tip to frest-graduate pastor who want to preach the miracle passage?

**Notonegoro:** It's the same with your last question. Do not reduce faith or hope of the congregation. Help them to keep their faith in God, not in miracle.

**Kosasih:** What is your expectation to somebody who compose a manual on how to preach miracle stories of the Gospels?

**Notonegoro:** I hope he show what is the main message of each miracle story in the bible.

**Kosasih:** Thanks for your information and sharing to me.

**Notonegoro:** I hope this interview will help you. May you complete your study as soon. Bravo.

Rev. Hendry Ongkowidjojo

(Pastor of Indonesia *Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia Andhika* in Surabaya)

**Kosasih:** I will begin this interview with your congregation. Would you tell me about your congregation? Their ethnic, social or economic level?

**Ongkowijoyo:** Majority, they come from Chinese ethnic. They are in the middle to above level financially though we have some from middle to low level.

**Kosasih:** Based on your pastoral experience and interaction to your congregation, what is the concept of your congregation about miracle? Do you think their concept is biblical?

**Ongkowijoyo:** They think that miracles are a sign of God's power and that Jesus is the Son of God. I think their concept based on the bible.

**Kosasih:** What is miracle story of the Gospels that you most like? Why? What is the meaning of that story for our contemporary lives?

**Ongkowijoyo:** Jesus feeding the five thousand. This story shows us that God is the Creator, and Jesus really is God, who can create something out of nothing. It shows how different He is in doing miracles in a way that He does not just perform wonderful things. Moreover, in this story, the Lord performs a lot of testing and involves his

disciples. From this, we learn that we need to be more submissive to Him, especially in facing the challenges of life and ministry, because God understands us and there are many problems we do not know the way out of, but the Lord knows what to do.

**Kosasih:** How do you prepare your messages on miracle stories? Describe brief steps in composing the sermon?

**Ongkowiyo:** First, finding the immediate context of the miracle story. Second, compares his text with the parallel records found in the other Gospels. Third, discover what the Gospel writers wanted to convey through the miracle records. Four, looking for the implication of the text for his audience today.

**Kosasih:** Does it mean sermon should have a single-idea only?

**Ongkowiyo:** No, it should not.

**Kosasih:** Is there any homiletical textbook that help you in preaching?

**Ongkowiyo:** Haddon Robinson's Biblical Preaching

**Kosasih:** How do you know the needs of your congregations in preaching? In what sense it's supporting the relevance of your sermons?

**Ongkowiyo:** To make my message down-to-earth, I perceive that a good relationship with the congregation is a must. I will get nothing if I don't know them at all. However, it is not enough to simply have good relationships. As a pastor, I must be

sensitive to my congregation's various needs and struggles. This will help him make my sermon relevant. Also, illustrations help me get my message across and especially aid in explaining difficult concepts. The most important is we close enough with them and monitoring the last situation and condition around us today.

**Kosasih:** Imagine a fresh-graduate pastor come and consult to you concerning preaching miracle stories of the gospels. What are your suggestions and recommendations for him/her?

**Ongkowijoyo:** I will tell him to do as I do in my sermon preparation. Also, he has to understand enough of the characteristics of each of the Gospels, and the nature of the miracle stories

**Kosasih:** If somebody wants to compose a manual in how to preach miracle stories of the Gospels, what is your expectation to the writer?

**Ongkowijoyo:** It will be helpful if there is a commentary of miracle stories as comprehensive as Klyne Snodgrass book, *Stories with Intent*.

**Kosasih:** OK Hendry. Thanks for your sharing and information.

**Ongkowijoyo:** I hope this help you. God bless you.

APPENDIX 2  
QUESTIONNAIRE

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain feedback on the material presented. Please answer the following questions carefully and honestly based only upon the material presented. Please do not place your name on this form. All responses on this sermon questionnaire will remain anonymous and confidential. Thank you for your help and valuable feedback!

Please type the appropriate number next to the statement using the scale below

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
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1. \_\_\_\_\_ The material easy understandable
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The material will help me to prepare miracle stories sermon.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The material is composed systematically.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The material fulfills my expectation
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The material is presented interactively
6. \_\_\_\_\_ The material is presented in interesting manner

Please type your brief response to the following questions:

7. Did you learn anything new in this seminar? (a) No (b) Yes. If yes, what?

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8. In 1 or 2 sentences, state what you believe the main idea of this material presented?

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=1=

9. What are positive observations you would share regarding this seminar?

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10. What are suggestions that you would share regarding this seminar?

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**Please circle the appropriate answer:**

11. Male or Female

12. You are in the      A. 1   B. 2   C. 3   D. 4   E. 5   year

13. Your last education:   A. High School      B. Undergraduate (in progress)  
   C. Undergraduate      D. Graduate

*Thank you so much for taking your time  
to complete this questionnaire*

=2=

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